

Ed wasn't dumb, despite what one could assume from him breaking into an abandoned amusement park in the middle of the night and not leaving despite the fact that half of the mascots wanted to kill him.

He really wasn't, he just made a lot of dumb decisions.

Trusting Rambley was, so far, not a dumb decision.

It became clear after about ten minutes of being in the park that a lot of his close calls were spared by Rambley, not by his own doing. Shutting doors, opening doors, directing him around, giving him clearance; Rambley was the reason Ed wasn't dead in a ditch somewhere.

Hell, Rambley was the reason he hadn't gone ahead and tried that seriously expired can of Bird Up. That must've at least saved him a bad bout of botulism.

Over these hours, Ed had begun to trust Rambley more and more. Going from 'this guy's setting me

up' to 'this guy is probably okay'. For someone like Ed who regularly ended up doing dangerous, dumb stuff and sometimes needed friends to bail him out, this was appreciated.

But he noticed something for a while. Something funky was going on. Not the rotten food or the strange meaty mascots who were trying to kill him- those were a lot worse than funky- but something... odd.

There was someone following him.

Or, more accurately, he was following someone. He would walk into an office and find it in functional condition, with cameras opened in all the spaces he had been, but with nobody there. At first it seemed like a coincidence, but then it kept happening. He kept walking into these offices and finding this same set up.

One time he heard the chair squeak before he got inside and found it pointing the wrong way like someone sprung out of it. VERY suspicious.

Ed didn't ask Rambley. In fact, Ed kept most of his comments and answers to Rambley rather brief. Even though he trusted him he didn't trust him that much. He had played enough games about AIs to realize that it was best to not say anything to set them off, so it was better to keep quiet.

So, Ed wasn't asking questions, Rambley wasn't talking, and there were weird obviously occupied offices. This was going to lead to a disaster.

And that disaster popped up out of nowhere.

Ed was heading out the backway of the Rambleberry Woods u-pick berry farm and arboretum and passing through the back offices when he stumbled upon another office. During which, Rambley was rambling.

"I can't believe that there wasn't even a single Rambleberry bush left! That's a shame... Oh, but we should be able to replant a whole orchard with the backup seeds once we get this place back in business! Rambleberries are exceptionally fast

growers and once you get a bush going, you'll get enough for- oh hold on a second. Wait just a- wait, wait, STOP!"

Ed came to an abrupt stop at the yell. Further down the hallway, a security door slammed shut and blocked his way. He furrowed his brows and looked to a partially smashed screen to his right for answers.

Rambley appeared on the screen looking flustered and sweaty, in a cartoony way with wide eyes and little sweat drops all over his face. Now that looked like a dead giveaway to Ed.

"S-Sorry, but it looks like we're having some technical difficulties with the door in the next room! Just for safety safe we're going to have to hang out out here until I get it open. I'll be done in a jiffy!"

Ed quirked a brow and looked to the door sensor outside of the security door. Not all of them had them, but this one did. That meant he could've just used his cuff to head through.

“I see where you’re looking, Buddy, and don’t you think about it. Trust me, it’s safer if you just sit tight and let me fix this. And in the meantime, would you like to see some secret super-special Rambleberry recipes? Check ‘em out!”

Suddenly a clip show of recipes appeared on the screen along with elevator music. It was like Rambley put him on hold.

Ed lasted on hold for about ten seconds before he heard something bumping around in the office. He stepped up to the door and listened through it. Even though a heavy metal wall of a door, he could hear the quiet scuffling inside.

Someone was in there.

Ed squinted suspiciously and backed up to look at the screen again. It was showing a recipe for Rambleberry fritters.... Okay, maybe Rambley had a point about replanting the bushes.

But Rambley was doing something. He was eerily silent. Maybe he was hiding something.

Ed began to slowly reach his arm out towards the censor. Slowly. Sloooooowly. Sloooooooooooooow-

“Hold it right there, Buster! I see what you’re doing!”
Rambley’s head suddenly popped into the screen. He shook his finger with a tsk, playful but firm. “Now, now, I know you want to help, but leave this to me! I just need a few more seconds and then... Wait, what are you doing? I can’t see your- w-wait are you-? STOP!”

Ed’s arm stopped just away from the censor. Rambley was back to sweating bullets.

“You really don’t want to do that!”

Ed cracked a smile at how flustered he looked.

“Ha ha, very funny,” Rambley said and pouted a little. “Okay, but seriously, it’s really important that you don’t open that door right now. This whole

save-the-park adventure could be at stake! So just don't."

"Why?" Ed asked.

"...Why?" The fact that Ed asked seemed to catch Rambley off guard. His smile got tense and he briefly glitched out, his face twisting up, flickering the wrong colors, and returning to normal. "Because I said so."

Ed challenged him with a look.

"Oookay, okay. That's not a great answer, I guess. But umm... You have to trust me on this! It's me, Rambley! Would I lie to you? -No, wait, STOP!"

Ed halted just inches from the censor. Any closer and that door would open.

Rambley stared with wide eyes and twitchy pupils before sighing. He slumped in defeat with his ears drooping.

“I guess you’re really determined, huh? Okay, Rangler. I guess... I guess I can tell you the truth. And the truth is... there’s uh... there’s another me in there.”

Ed’s eyes went wide. Another him? That could only mean... one like the others. Like Mollie, like Lloyd. Another oversized mushy costume full of meat. Ed silently pointed at the screen questioningly.

“Yup, that’s right. Me. Rambley the Raccoon. Right inside that room right there. And let me tell you, it’s not a pretty sight... So, let me just get that door open and that thing out of the way and then we’ll be on our way!”

Ed didn’t really want to get chased around again, or risk having another... Mollie incident happening. Monster or not, seeing that was hard to stomach. It was like watching his childhood die. Seeing it happen to Rambley would, well, it would make these little chats one hundred times more tense.

Though... he was sort of curious to what Rambley might look like. Would he be that weird funky realistic look like Mollie was? Would he look like a real raccoon? Would he be gangly and weird like Lloyd? It started to make him very, VERY curious at what this thing could look like.

Maybe he could take a peek and Rambley could just shut the door back. He already did when he first walked up. He could make it look like an accident and then wouldn't have to get Rambley on him about it.

...Wait, what was he thinking?! There was a difference between stupid and suicidal, and this idea was honestly a little of both. He already saw enough of Mollie, inside and out. He could pass on Rambley.

He would just wait until the coast was clear and move along. Odds were he'd just run into Real Rambley later anyways. Probably in a tight corridor or hiding in the back of his car when he finally tried to leave.

“Uh... Soooo, it’s looking like, uh... Hmmm... Oh, hey! I have a fantastic idea! How about we walk back through Rambleberry Woods and go out that way? That way we can get a lay of the land for our BIG replanting project! Way more fun than some boring backdoor, right?”

Ed translated that to Rambley not getting that door open.

...

Screw it. If he was going to have to hike back anyways, he wanted to see this mutant raccoon.

Ed thrust his wrist to the censor and the door opened with a beep.

“Wait, did you just-?!”

He ducked through before the door could slam shut, nearly closing on him.

“NO, NO, NO! STOP!”

The room looked like the offices he had went through before, save two things. One was the multitude of security screens that were all lit up with Rambley's panicked expression. They flickered, flashed, and glitched up. Secondly, there was no mutant raccoon.

But there was a wall that blocked off what he guessed correctly was a short hallway leading to the back exit, and he could hear scuffling back there.

Ed braced himself and waited, but nothing came out. So, he began to step forward.

Rambley was unusually silent and sparing a glance at the monitors showed the multitude of faces staring back, all petrified. That made Ed a little more nervous about this decision, but still he stepped towards that wall.

The frantic scuffling stopped, and he paused to listen. Then he began to peek around the corner,

expecting to find a monster waiting to ambush him on the other side.

What he found instead was shocking.

It was another mascot, just like Rambley had warned. But it was nothing like Ed had expected.

A green body suit covered in white censors barely held in the overflow of puffy fur that stuck out around the ankles, the wrists, the neck. A matching green censor-dotted cap was tugged over the head, with two large, fuzzy ears poking out. An oversized poof of a striped tail stood tall with its fur on end, bushy and fluffed.

A pair of purple-pink eyes met his. Wide and filled with fear. They were different than Mollie's. They weren't the blacked eyes of a soulless animal. They were a brilliant, glassy, almost like the eyes of a doll or toy.

It wasn't just a mascot of Rambley. It was an incredibly accurate mascot of Rambley. More

accurate than Mollie or Lloyd had been. The only thing not on model- other than the motion capture getup- was that his hands and feet were a little bigger and more proportionate to his body. Everything else was as dead-on as it could be with him not being flat.

Also, there was one other thing. It was short.

The other mascots had been grotesquely oversized. Large enough to take Ed down without much effort. Rambley was barely pushing four feet tall. It might've not even reached it, might've been three or three and a half. It was hard to tell with the fur and the cowering.

But it hadn't attacked him yet. It was just staring at him. Staring at him with the same look the Rambley in the screen had.

...Wait a minute.

“IIIIIIIEEEEEEE!!!!”

Ed jumped as the Rambley shrieked and hid behind its tail, backing into the corner between the wall and stuck door.

“NO! NO! YOU’RE NOT SUPPOSED TO SEE ME!” he yelped. He hugged his tail to his chest and continued to try to push at the stuck door with his other hand. “Stay back! I’m- I’M RABID! I’ll bite ‘cha!” He chomped.

Ed’s mouth just dropped open as he pieced together exactly what was happening. It wasn’t hard to put two and two together, especially when there was a chorus of voices from the monitors behind him that were mimicking the same voice in front of him.

This wasn’t just some Rambley the Raccoon mutant mascot. This was Rambley.

That is, this was the Rambley behind the screen.

No wonder he kept seeing abandoned offices- Rambley was leading him along from them!

With Ed staring in shocked silence, Rambley became even more uneasy. He gritted his teeth and sunk further into the corner.

“...Are... Are you going to say something?” he squeaked.

“...Wow.”

“...Is... Is that a good wow?!” Rambley perked up only to instantly droop. “Ugh, no. Of course it’s not a good wow.” He began to pet and comb at his tail, mumbling as he did, “I didn’t even get a chance to comb my hair...”

“I- so, wait...” Ed put a hand to his head as he let it sink in. “So... You’re just...?”

“Rambley the Raccoon! That’s me!” Rambley said with phony enthusiasm and a strained smile. “Nice to meetcha! No- No flash photography, please! Heh, uh... Sorry.”

“No, but I mean- you’re the guy I’ve been talking to this whole time. That-.” He pointed back towards the screens. “Is you.”

“As a matter of fact, it is! I’m sure you’re confused but- wait, d-don’t come any closer.” Rambley squished himself into the corner again as Ed dared to take a step forward. “Please?”

“Easy, I’m not coming any closer... But I’m not going to hurt you either,” Ed said. He lowered his volume as he realized how skittish the mascot was. “We’re friends, right?”

“Are we?” Rambley asked distantly.

“I think we are. You’ve saved my neck like five times now. Least I can do is be your buddy.”

Rambley slowly lowered his tail. He had an unsure look. “Do you still trust me?” he asked quietly.

Ed didn’t know how to answer that. So, he gave the only answer he could think of.

“Uhhh... Eh?”

Rambley lowered his eyes with disappointment.

“Oh.”

There was a very awkward silence. Ed looked back at the screens to see that most of them were a little glitchy but the ones that were clear were copying the mascot's expression, though in a more cartoony way.

“How've you been doing all of this...?” Ed asked in quiet disbelief.

“Oh! Funny story! I've got a chip in my brain!”

Rambley pointed at his temple. “It lets me hook up to the screens and the security system! I can run the whole place from inside the safety of this spiffy green bodysuit!” He pulled the green suit away and snapped it back. “Isn't that neat?”

“That's one word for it,” Ed half-agreed.

Another would've been crazy, or unbelievable, or bizarre, or bat sh-

"But cool! Right?" Rambley asked. His eyes shining almost like they did on the screens.

It would've been terrifying if he didn't make it so cute. Ed nodded.

"Gee, thank you! I know this must be a lot for you to take in, but I really do appreciate the- w-wait!"

Ed dared to take another step and the second he did Rambley shirked back again.

He really was genuinely afraid. It wasn't some sort of drawn-out act; this cartoonish mascot animal thing was really scared of him.

They weren't going to make any progress with Rambley cowering in the corner like that. Realizing this, Ed finally snapped out of his shock enough to do something about it.

“Buddy, it’s okay. I promise I’m not going to hurt you. Come on. Come on out,” he coaxed. Rambley still seemed hesitant. “Here, how about this?”

Ed knelt on the dirtied floor thinking that maybe it was his size making Rambley so nervous. Now he was the smaller one in the defenseless position.

Surprisingly, this seemed to work. Rambley slowly released his tail and began to inch closer. It wasn’t until he was standing right in front of Ed that he finally became convinced that he wasn’t going to get blindsided.

Rambley waved with one hand and tucked the other behind him. “Hey! Heh. You know, you’re a lot bigger in person.”

Ed gave him a warm smile and Rambley giggled nervously.

“Well, Isn’t this something? You and me in the same room- no screens or anything!” he chirped. He leaned in just a little more and rubbed his chin

thoughtfully. “The cameras don’t do you justice! Let me get a good look at you.”

Ed could’ve said the same thing, all things considered. Now up close, he could see more of the mascot’s details. That is, he could see how much of the ‘mascot’ looked less like a suit and more like the real deal, just not as cartoony as expected.

Some of the mascots Ed had sworn he had seen before. Just seeing Mollie brought up distant memories of seeing her in the park.

But not Rambley. He was something completely new. He didn’t look like a prop at all.

Rambley the Raccoon was real.

“Not half bad!” Rambley complimented.

...And apparently flirting with him. Huh.

But he could unpack that later. There were more important questions to be answered now that Ed had

him in the room and didn't think he was going to go nuts if he asked.

"Rambley, what happened here?" he asked with concern.

Rambley's energy deflated instantly.

"I guess I owe you the whole truth now..." he mumbled. He wrung his hands together before holding them out like saying 'enough is enough'.
"Okay. So... A long time ago there were all of us. Me, Mollie, Finley- and the rest, yadda yadda. We were characters for the park! Like, on the screens like I was. It was our job to keep the place running and show everybody a good time! But screens aren't that cuddly. You can't hug a screen. And taking pictures? Puh-lease, the reflections are a nightmare. So... the clever minds behind the park decided that it'd be best to get REAL mascots."

"Oh no..." Ed mumbled. That didn't bode well.

Rambley gave a nervous giggle. “Heh, you’re not too far off... So, they grew bodies in some sort of science-y thingamajig and then we were uploaded into the bodies. First couple of ‘em didn’t work. BUT then they finally had success and managed to move Mollie into a new body. Ta da! Now the park had a REAL Mollie the Macaw! Then Finley and... Lloyd. Because they just HAD to have Lloyd,” Rambley muttered sarcastically and rolled his eyes. “They gave Lloyd a body even before me...” he muttered.

“So, they came first? Is that why they’re... different?” Ed asked.

It would be a bad time to offend Rambley, but instead he just perked up.

“That’s right! As a matter of fact, my first body looked a lot like theirs. But it didn’t work right, so they had to farm another one. By time I finally got out into the park... let’s just say that I didn’t have to worry about flash photography all that much...”

His eyes down-casted sadly. “You know... This is the first time I’ve left my home in a really long time.

Normally I just hide in there and stay plugged to the front gate, waiting for someone to come by. But once you came and we started working together, I wanted to make sure you were safe and that I wouldn’t be locked out by any electrical failures or anything, so... So, I came back!”

Rambley put on a toothy grin. His pointed pearly whites looked too clean to be real, with little pointed incisors to match his cartoon counterpart.

“Now I know that you’re probably thinking ‘Oh boy! Wow! Rambley was... lying to me the whole time’.” Rambley sighed and rubbed his arm. “I understand if you don’t trust me anymore and if you don’t want to help me, but I think we still have a chance to work some magic here! The only difference is that I’m not as cute.”

Despite everything, there was a part of Ed’s heart that was still soft for the Rambley he grew up with.

So, having the real deal standing in front of him looking so sad pulled at those strings.

“You’re still pretty cute. But I-.”

“I AM?! Thank you!!! You should see me with my bandana on! Or I guess you already have, heh... Oh, sorry! Keep going, I’m listening. You were saying?”

“I was saying that it’s okay. I know why you didn’t tell me about... this.” Ed gestured to him up and down. “But I need you to be honest with me. Is there anything else? I don’t want any more surprises.”

“Nope! Nothing that I can think of,” Rambley assured. He looked and sounded relieved. “I’m really sorry, Buddy. I know it’s hard trusting someone who’s not been totally up front... again. But you’ve gotta believe me, and you can trust me! We’re a team.” He tapped his chin thoughtfully, a hand on his hip. “There’s gotta be something I can do to make it up to you.”

“You don’t need to do that.”

“Oh, I know!” Rambley snapped his fingers. “Are you tired? Do you need a break?”

Ed was wide-awake and full of adrenaline and instinctual fear of wild animals creeping up and attacking him around every corner. He couldn’t have slept even if it was safe. So yes, he was exhausted.

“Well, I have just the place when we can hunker down and get a quick snack! How about you come back to my house with me?”

“You have a house?”

“A house, a den, a burrow- whatever you want to call it! The important part is that it’s not too far from here- and totally safe!”

There was a spot in the back of Ed’s brain that woke up and reminded him that no, he couldn’t trust Rambley. He really shouldn’t go to an even more secluded area with him. He really, really shouldn’t go

to any ‘totally safe’ location when Rambley had been lying through his teeth since the second he started pretending to be an AI on the screen.

But it was that or keep walking around and he could really use a breather. Was it worth the risk?

...

Eh, he could probably take him.

“Sure.”

“Whew! Am I glad to hear that. ‘Cause I’m bushed,” Rambley said, pretending to wipe his forehead.

“Ooooo, this is so exciting! You’re going to be my first visitor ever! *Gasp* And you’ll get to see my train!”

“I already saw your train back when I rode it.”

“No, no! My little train! It’s so cool, you’re going to love it. I could tell from how much you enjoyed the

big train. I've never seen anyone over the intended age group smile so much! Well, except for me."

It wasn't what Rambley said that embarrassed Ed but the fact that he was right. That he had enjoyed that stupid little train ride and that Rambley had noticed.

"Well, let's get this show on the road!" Rambley said. He turned around and posed like he was going to stride off, only to halt as he looked at the door. "...Or yeah, the door's broken. Eh... Let's get this show on the road that'a way!"

He rubbed his neck with an embarrassed smile and waltzed by towards the door they came in. With a snap of his fingers and a wink the door opened once again.

Just a little reminder that Ed was getting the behind-the-scenes experience, he guessed. He followed along, looking at the security screens as he passed and noticing the numerous Rambleys watching with eager but frozen smiles. More like

screensavers than the friendly cartoon figure from earlier.

Guess he wouldn't really need a cartoon when the real deal was standing right in front of him. Strutting along like he was a cartoon character, save the amount of realistic fur.

He wasn't sure if it was the brain fatigue or what, but he had the strange urge to touch his tail. Not grab and yank at it like an eager toddler would, but maybe just a little bit. Would it be like teddy bear fur or animal fur? The real questions worth asking, he guessed.

"Hey..."

Rambley spun on his heel so quickly and attentively that it startled Ed.

"Whatcha need, Rangler?" Rambley asked. His eyes big and glistening. So cartoonish that it reminded him that he was an adult asking to pat a talking raccoon.

“Can I just... You know what? I’m good.”

“Aww, come on. Don’t be shy! Conductor Rambley reporting for duty! So, whatcha need?”

Well, he tried to back out. Guess he had no choice but to go for it.

“Could I... touch you?”

“...Can you what now?” Rambley squeaked.

“Sorry, that came off creepy. I meant it in a very non-creepy way.”

“O-Oh! No, no, that’s not creepy! That’s a very reasonable question. I’d- I’d guess kids would be asking to do that all the time if they were here! I mean how could you resist? I’m adorable!” Rambley said, quickly pulling it back together enough to put his hands on his cheeks and wink.

Ed couldn't tell if he was purposefully mocking him or just really flustered.

“...You know what? Sure! Why not?”

Much to Ed's further surprise, Rambley pulled off his green censor hat and tilted his head forward. He wiggled his ears.

“Give it a shot! And don't worry, I don't really have rabies. And if I did, I would only be able to transmit it through saliva. Which I can't, because ‘I don't bite’,” he joked. “Unless you're made of Rambleberries, which I'm going to take an educated guess and say you're not. Heh, heh.”

That was a nervous babble if he had ever heard it, but he decided to go ahead and take the offering. He gave Rambley a pat on the head. Then laid his hand flat on the top of his head to feel the fluff.

Well, there was another big difference between him and the other mascots. Ed didn't get direct hand-on-head contact with Mollie, but her feathers

looked almost fake. Like they would be rough and stiff. In their brief one-on-one, Llyod's fur had been short and dirtied. And Finley... he didn't want to think of that texture. It was sickening, ugh.

But Rambley was exceptionally soft. It didn't feel like fake fur but instead like a really soft plush fur. It really did feel like teddy bear fur but not so fake. It was hard to describe it. He was warm too.

"Oh wow..." Rambley gasped. He inhaled through his teeth. "I forgot how it felt to be touched. That's weird. I wonder how that happened..."

Ed smiled back. He started to pull his hand away, but Rambley followed it, pressing back into it like a cat might. Turning his head as much as he could until his super fluffed cheek was in Ed's palm.

He looked up at Ed through squinted eyes. Ed's brows raised. Rambley's eyes went wide. He jerked his head back and yanked his cap back on, keeping his face low and covered.

“S-Sorry about that! Looks like I’m the one making it creepy now. But it’s not my fault! Like I said, I was made for hugging.” Rambley peeked up at him. “I give excellent hugs.”

“I give okay hugs,” Ed joked.

Rambley laughed a little but seemed a little disappointed by something. He turned around quickly.

“Right!” He pointed down the hall. “Off we go! Next stop: home!”

Now at this point Ed wasn’t sure if it was a good call to go to Rambley’s home. That sounded like the sort of place that could either be secretly dangerous or, even worse, would get him stuck staying overnight in some kind of employee breakroom with musty couches and no coffee. Either of those could be a nightmare.

But he was way too invested to leave now. If not for the park and the mysteries behind it, then the key to

both: this funky little living raccoon cartoon character.

Kid Ed would've killed for a chance like this, Adult Ed wasn't going to let him down.

So, he trusted Rambley again. Now all that was left was to see where it took them.

Ed could remember some parts of the park like the back of his hand. Which meant that whenever they passed something newer, he recognized it, and then had no idea where he was going.

In short, he was completely at the mercy of Rambley's directional skills and had no way to predict if he was being led into a trap or not. He was still somewhat guarded about this whole thing. Didn't stop him from following him halfway across the park and even farther away from his car, but it gave him something to mull over.

It turned out there was a whole extra section to the park that hadn't been there when he visited. Some

sort of little town square sort of area with a ring of gift shops and a couple of restaurants, and even a little park with a fountain filled with slimy green water. Overlooking the square was the other side of the clock tower, and hanging overhead was the moon.

It was at the center of the circular square where they were headed. There stood a house built into the trunk of an oversized- and obviously fake- tree. One with a little white picket fence gate surrounding it and a big fake-wooden sign above the door that read “Rambley’s House” in bold letters. A smaller sign mounted on the gate read “Rambley Meet & Greet 9AM-11AM, 1PM-5PM. No flash photography!”

There were the old, worn remains of some streamers and strings of lights left hanging in the branches. Wide rectangular windows wrapped around the tree and gave a good view of the inside, though it was too dark to make out too many details. The rounded door was cartoonish in shape but sized to fit a regular human.

Rambley pushed through the gate and politely held it open for Ed to follow. Ed briefly paused before following. It was just a rickety white gate, nothing he couldn't step over if he had to bail.

“And here we are! Welcome to Casa Raccoon! Please, no flash photography. Postcards can be purchased in the giftshop,” Rambley recited.

He all but skipped to the door and flung it open before reaching in and snapping his fingers. The lights inside the house came on and a warm glow poured out through the windows and doorway.

Rambley gestured his hand to the door with an eager smile. “Come on in!”

Last chance to back out, Ed reminded himself. This could still be a trap. Though if it was one then it was the most welcoming trap he had walked into all night.

He had to see it through, so he stepped inside.

It was like stepping into a cartoon.

The quaint little house was clearly stylized to resemble Rambley's house in one of his cartoons. It wasn't the one Ed remembered, but probably a newer one after he stopped watching.

Half of the little house was made up of a living room with a big plastic fireplace mounted to the wall. There was a screen in the fireplace that showed a flickering cartoon fire. On the mantle and likely attached to it were picture frames of Rambley and all his friends- also cartoon. There was one of him with Mollie, one of him with Finley, and one of him with Lloyd that was distinctly blocked by a Rambley snow globe that looked out of place and probably came from the gift shop.

There was a somewhat small couch and an armchair poised in front of a plastic TV that looked like a tree stump. There was a screen in that too that was muted but airing an old Rambley cartoon. The couch and armchair were a white and red gingham pattern

and somewhat matched a round red rug on the floor between them and the TV.

On the wall just past the fireplace was a door with a bathroom sign on it. Though instead of a human figure on it, it was a little blue Rambley silhouette.

The other side of the house was a little kitchen. The cabinets, appliances, and refrigerator had that rounded, cutesy, fake look that the fireplace had. There was a small table too, one that looked like it was made of thick cut wood- again, plastic- and had two stout little chairs pulled up to it. The floor was a white and light blue checkerboard pattern.

There was thick wooden pillar in the center of the room that looked almost like a miniature tree inside of the tree. Past that, there was something in the back that was blocked with a lot of sheets and curtains. That piqued Ed's interest instantly, but he decided to go ahead and keep following Rambley.

Rambley made a beeline for the little kitchen. The appliances were clearly fake, so the little hot plate on

the counter must've been grabbed from a break room. Rambley clicked it on. He then grabbed a coffee pot and filled it with a bottle of water he got out of the fake fridge before sticking it on the hot plate.

“Sit down and make yourself comfy. I'll be back in two shakes of a raccoon's tail!” Rambley said with a playful swish of his tail. Then he rushed over and disappeared behind the curtains.

Ed sat down at the table. It was a clunky faux-wood actually-plastic material and was made for Rambley's height instead of his own. So, he had to either bend his legs and straddle the table or stick them straight out underneath it. After some consideration he did the latter, crossing them and his arms, and then got a better look around.

The place was pretty quaint, and the fact that it was furnished with some real furniture was a plus. The kitchen might've been fake, but that couch and armchair in the living room section were clearly real. Unless Rambley dragged those in, but the red

checkerboard patterns matched the red rug perfectly.

The only problem with this house was those large windows surrounding it. There was a large rectangular one stretching around the back of the kitchen too, giving him a good view of the street circling the outside of the tree. Someone could walk by and see right in.

That was when it suddenly hit him. Hard.

This wasn't Rambley's true-to-cartoon humble abode, a place for Meet & Greets and pictures alone.

This was his enclosure. Made especially so people could watch him as they walked by.

That realization hit the bottom of Ed's stomach like a rock. Suddenly all the magic of this place was sucked out. It was all smoke and mirrors hiding something much more hollow.

Ed sat there staring off into space. He could hear Rambley humming from somewhere behind the curtain. It reminded him that the thing standing behind that curtain was not Rambley, but some sort of meat-filled mascot suit grown in a lab. Just like Mollie, just like Lloyd, and at any moment it could suddenly turn on him and-

“TA DA!”

Rambley hopped out from behind the curtains. He had removed his green motion capture suit and replaced it with a very familiar oversized, red bandana tied in a neat bow in the back. He had also clearly combed his fur because it was all brushed down instead of sticking out all over the place.

You know what? Scratch that whole meat mascot thing.

“Sorry I’m late. I bet you’re half-starved by now!” Rambley said. He came over to the table while reaching back to adjust his bandana, then clasped

his hands eagerly. “Would the gentleman like to start with a look at our drink menu?”

Ed smiled at that. “Sure. What’ve you got?”

“We have a classic lemon-lime, a finely aged cherry, and a strong blue raspberry that has a nice body to it. Really lingers on the palate,” Rambley said in a fake posh tone.

“I guess I’ll take the... Wait, are you talking about Bird Up?” Ed asked in surprised.

“Bird yup! Heh, eugh.” Rambley cringed at his own joke.

“And it’s still good?” Ed asked. The raccoon nodded. “That’s crazy! That’s the whole reason I wasn’t raiding any of the soda machines, because I thought they’d have some kind of funky salmonella.”

Rambley got a cheekily sly smile. “You want some?” he asked knowingly.

“I want you to pump that directly into my veins.”

“Ha! Well, I can’t do that, but I can whip you up a little something. Gimmie two seconds!”

Rambley headed back to the counter and went into a cabinet underneath it, tail swishing excitedly.

Ed was on the edge of his seat. He hadn’t had Bird Up since the last time he came here. It didn’t exist anymore, and nothing matched the flavor he remembered. How could it still be good? Maybe they had a factory that made it in the park. That sounded doubtful until you took the ‘growing mascots’ thing into mind. It made too much sense that they’d have the stuff to make it here.

Or that was what he was hoping until Rambley broke out the canister. Some chrome cylinder with the Bird Up logo on it that he twisted the top off. He set it aside reached up on his tip toes and opened a cabinet, revealing that it was filled with a slew of novelty mugs. He pulled one out and filled it with some of the bottled water.

Then he got out a plastic spoon and got out a spoonful of thick, lime green syrup out of the canister and dumped it into the mug. Then another one. Then another one. Then stirred it all up.

That had to be the Bird Up soda syrup that he was mixing into water. Not carbonated water, but room temperature completely flat water.

Flat, warm syrup in water. Lemon-lime flavored. Ho boy.

Ed forced himself to keep a beaming smile and Rambley was blissfully unaware of how much strain was hidden behind it.

“Here you go!”

Ed mumbled a thanks through that grin and decided to get it over with and took a swig. It didn't taste bad, it just tasted weird. The syrup had given the water a slimy texture and the lemon-lime flavor was too sweet.

He had the intense urge to spit it back out, but Rambley was still staring at him.

“Does it taste like you remembered?” he asked excitedly.

Ed swallowed the mouthful- and kept it down- and gave him a shaky thumbs up. Rambley returned with a beaming smile.

“Fantastic~! And it could taste even better too if we could get our hands on some seltzer water! You just tell me when you’re ready for a refill and I’ll mix you up another one. Maybe with cherry next time!”

Rambley scurried back to the counter and Ed very quickly set down his drink with no intention of picking it up again. Unless Rambley asked. He really hoped Rambley didn’t ask.

Rambley was humming and bouncing in place as he got dinner ready. He got out two plastic bowls and set them on the counter, then he hoisted a bag out

from its hiding spot beside the counter and rested it on the floor against it. He took a scoop from the bag and scooped a couple of scoops of some brown puffs into one of the bowls.

Ed took immediate notice. The sound alone was sort of telling.

Was... Was that dog food? Or cat food?

Rambley filled both bowls before setting them down and getting the now warmed coffee pot. He then poured steaming hot water into both bowls, onto the mysterious brown puffs.

Was that dog food and hot water?

“Sorry, I don’t have any milk. But trust me, this stuff’s so good that it’ll taste good with anything!”

Wait, no. It was some kind of cereal. Ed breathed a sigh of relief.

Rambley plopped a couple of plastic spoons into the bowl and carried them over, setting one on the table right in front of Ed.

“Dig in!”

Ed was a little wary once he noticed the “cereal” was sinking to the bottom of the water, but he was already in this deep. He already drank the flat Bird Up, he had to at least taste the watery dog food.

He tried a small bite and much to his relief it tasted overwhelmingly of berry. It had a weird sort of chewy texture, but that could be because it was a little stale. It wasn't moldy at least so he took the plunge and kept eating. Running around all night somehow worked up an appetite.

“You like it?” Rambley asked happily.

“It's great!” Ed said honestly.

It was probably going to ruin his intestines later, but at least it tasted good going down.

“Better than the Bird Up?” Rambley asked with a cheeky smile.

Because of course he knew. He wasn’t around people much, but he knew how to read a silent thumbs up that obvious.

“Yeeahh... *Ahem* So, what is this stuff?”

“Rambley Rations! They’re specifically made for me, Rambley the Raccoon! But don’t worry, they’re one-hundred percent safe for human consumption.”

...Wait, so this was raccoon food?

...Eh. He kept eating.

“Well, whatever it is, it’s good.”

“It’s great! I love this stuff!” Rambley gushed. He took a bite and pressed a hand to his cheek like he was savoring it. Then gave up on that and began tearing into it like he hadn’t eaten for weeks.

But what was it really? Ed looked towards that oversized bag again. He couldn't read the wording from here other than the "Rambley's Rations" label, fit with a cartoon Rambley head. Specifically made, he said?

This had to be some sort of mascot chow, which backed up Rambley's comment about him being grown in a lab. Ed hadn't really thought about it, but Rambley could've been lying to him. This was a point in his favor.

Well, actually the real point in his favor was that he was chewing at his food and not Ed's face. But how hadn't he ran out by now? How come he hadn't gotten sick of it?

"Do you eat this stuff a lot?" he asked.

"Yup! It's got all the vitamins and minerals I need! Which is a big help. I can't exactly wander off to the supermarket, can I?"

“But it’s only this? Don’t you get tired of it? I mean, I guess if you don’t have a choice... it really doesn’t matter.”

Ed didn’t want to knock his only meal, but Rambley wasn’t offended in the slightest.

“I could never get tired of this stuff! This is my comfort chow... But, eh, I wouldn’t say that I wouldn’t eat something else if I had the chance. Back a loooong time ago I used to fish in the aquarium. But then there was, uh... Let’s say someone else needed the fish more than I did...” His mouth scrunched up. “Sometimes I find an old can and sometimes they’re still good.”

“That’s all?”

“That and, uh, sometimes when I’m really hungry, I- uh- you see- I eat...” Rambley covered his mouth. Then pulled his hand back to squeak past it before covering it again, “Rats.”

Ed's head snapped back up at that. "Did you say rats?"

Rambley's eyes darted off somewhere else.

"You eat rats?"

"I eat rats," he mumbled, more embarrassed.

"You eat rats?!"

"I eat rats! Yeesh, it's not that big of a deal! Raccoons eat rats all the time! I thought you'd be more impressed that I don't eat garbage," Rambley huffed, crossing his arms and looking away in a pout.

Ed knew he really shouldn't. Rambley was annoyed, he really shouldn't-

"...Do you eat garbage?"

Rambley looked almost gob smacked. "N-Never! I have NEVER eaten garbage!"

“Sorry! I had to ask. I mean, you know with being a raccoon and all-.”

“I do NOT eat garbage!” Rambley huffed. His cheeks puffed and his ears lowered, and he sat like that for a second before deflating with a quiet, “I’ve just... taken stuff out of the garbage- but not actual garbage!”

Oh, okay. So, he didn’t just look like a raccoon. He acted like one too.

“Huh. So, you are a little trash panda,” Ed teased with a sly smile.

He realized a second too late that he probably shouldn’t have said that.

“Wha-Wha-What did you call me?!” Rambley sputtered.

“People- like- they call raccoons trash pandas. I didn’t come up with it,” Ed said. He lifted his hands defensively.

Rambley processed that with his mouth dropped open and this look on his face that was a mix of horrified and embarrassed. Had he truly been a cartoon there might’ve been a stark blush across his face.

The look on Rambley’s face- that look. He was about to have a little detonation on his hands and all he could do was watch the fuse burn down.

But then Rambley’s mouth shut tight, and he got an annoyed look.

“Alright, Bucko. You’re about to talk yourself out of seconds,” he said. He waved his spoon at him and then continued huffily and puffily munching at his chow.

The lack of an explosion made Ed feel a little bad.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to offend you. I was just kidding around,” he apologized.

“Trash panda,” Rambley mumbled grumpily.

“Pandas are cute!”

“Are trash pandas cute?”

“Sure! Why do you think they give ‘em a cute nickname?”

Rambley proceeded to pull his bandana out and shove his face down into it, mortified.

Ed reached across the table and gave him a sympathetic pat on the shoulder. Rambley trembled a little at the touch but didn’t pull away.

Eventually Ed pulled his hand back and returned to eating in silence. Eventually Rambley pushed his bandana further up to continue eating underneath it.

Once he was done, Ed tried to break the awkward tension with the only question he thought could. A question he had pondered for a while before finally asking it.

“Where’s the train?”

“Oh yeah, I was going to show you the train,” Rambley mumbled into his bandana. He pulled it down and retied it around his neck. “I suppose I can still show you the train.”

“I would really like to see your train,” Ed said.

“Hmm... Okay. I’ll tell you what,” Rambley said, tenting his fingers “I miiiight be able to let this little trash panda incident go, but only under one condition.”

“What condition?”

“It’s a BIG condition. Are you sure?”

“Guess it depends on what that condition is,” Ed played along.

Rambley got a downright mischievous smile.

“You’ve got to tell me your name,” he said. “And then I get to come up with any nickname I want, no matter how goofy it is.”

Ed gasped, still playing along.

“Gimmie your name, Rangler,” Rambley said, cackling like Salem the Skunk.

“Well, I guess I’ve got no choice...” Ed sighed. “My name is... Ed.”

“Ed,” Rambley repeated. He rubbed his chin. “Hmm... Ed... Bedhead Ed... Eddie... Eddie Spaghetti...?”

Ed reached up and tried to tame his hair a little.

“Give me some time, I’ll think up a good one!”
Rambley promised. He hopped up from his chair.
“Well, let’s get moving!”

Ed got up to follow. “How far is it?”

“Oh, not too far...” Rambley said with a cheeky smile.

He took about seven steps towards the back of the room- between the kitchen and curtained area- and walked up to a small rug. He stepped on it with one foot, and then slid it away, doing a half spin and teetering on his remaining foot while pointing down at the revealed trapdoor hidden beneath.

“Close enough?” he asked excitedly.

Maybe a little too close, honestly. The last thing Ed wanted to climb into was a tiny trapdoor.

“It’s down there?” he asked.

“Yup!” Rambley hoisted up the hatch and revealed the dark, square pit underneath. “Right down here!”

Funny how quickly the mood shifted around Rambley. Teetering back from comfortable to uncomfortable and feeling safe to feeling very on guard so fast.

In short, that little hatch made Ed very nervous.

“Why don’t you go first...?” he asked slowly.

“That works for me! Stay close though, and watch your step!”

Rambley climbed down into the darkness and Ed was left standing there alone.

Once again, he had a chance to scamper away or just refuse to climb down there. Once again, he gave into his curiosity and climbed down into the hatch.

It turned out there was a sort of crawlspace underneath Rambley’s home. From the smell alone

he could recognize it as one of those unfinished dusty basements. There was even a little ladder leading down into it, but it was so short that he could've easily just hopped down. Though once down there he would have to lean over far just to walk around.

"Rambley?" he called.

"Over here! Come on in!"

He was somewhere further into the basement. It was too dark to see him or anything else.

"I... I can't really see."

"Just shut the hatch and take two steps in. You won't trip on anything!"

Ed considered his options, tapping his fingers on the hatch above. Then he took a deep breath and pulled the hatch closed while ducking down. He always had his flashlight. He could always turn it on.

He took a few unsteady steps into the darkness, feeling along the roof of the crawlspace as he did. Inching along until Rambley spoke up.

“Right there! Okay, okay, are you ready?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” Ed murmured.

There was a small click.

Suddenly the crawlspace was filled with light from dozens of colorful lights taped up to the ceiling and hanging in loops above the train.

It wasn’t just a train set. It was at least five or six train sets linked up together into a maze of tracks and little buildings. Some of which were miniature recreations of the park attractions themselves. There were even some action figures of the characters sprinkled in, including one of Rambley himself.

Seeing them spread out in front of him brought back a memory of the train sets sold in the Indigo Park gift shops. Expensive sets that would probably cost a

fortune to get one of, collector's editions, not really meant to be played with. Ed hadn't ever really wanted one or had been interested in them all that much, but now he was looking at the display and he felt like a kid in a toy store again.

He looked to Rambley to see what he thought, but he wasn't looking at the trains. Rambley was looking at him with eager eyes and a hopeful smile. Like he was relishing in his awe. Thrilled to see someone else so excited in the little world he had created.

"Soooo?" he coaxed.

"Wow."

"Good wow?" Rambley pressed.

"Great wow. This is incredible! How many sets is this?"

"Seven! And a few extra things here and there. Oh, oh! Wait, you haven't seen it on yet!"

Rambley plopped down on an oversized pillow on his knees and grabbed up a little controller off the floor. With the press of a button, the trains started up and began to make their way around the tracks. Each one meticulously pathed in a way that none of them came anywhere close to colliding in the spots where the paths overlapped.

He waved for Ed to come over and patted the pillow beside his for him to sit with him. Ed sat down cross legged on the cushion. It was a little too small to use as a seat, but better than the floor.

Ed noticed that there was a ring of pillows placed strategically around the trainset. Each spaced a little apart from one another. Chairs, he realized. Chairs for a space too short to have chairs. And chairs for people who weren't going to show up.

How long had Rambley been waiting for someone to show up just to show them his train?

Suddenly the train set wasn't nearly as interesting as the living character sitting directly to his left. He

watched as the raccoon laid down on his belly, propping his head up on his hands and watching the train circle around. His head lightly bobbing to music that wasn't there- maybe he was imagining the song from the train ride.

Rambley watched the trains with lidded eyes filled with adoration. He just seemed so at peace with the world. So content watching those little trains do the same circles they had done countless times before.

Ed had never felt a feeling quite like he did in that room and in that moment. It was cozy and warm, and cute, but also... sad. There was something so, so sad about seeing Rambley look so enthralled by his train...

In the hidden basement underneath his enclosure.

...

Well, great. Now he was going to have to guard this weird little raccoon man with his life. It was like all

the stars aligned to make sure he felt especially overprotective of this strange little guy.

And he was really regretting the trash panda comment now.

They silently sat together and watched the trains. The only sound being the low hum of them zipping around. Well, until Rambley eventually began to hum again. As expected, it was the train tune.

Ed wasn't the type who really zoned out or meditated, but this was enough to get him relaxed. He just let time tick by slowly.

...

Until he yawned. It had been a long night; it was no surprise one crept out.

Yet Rambley snapped to attention.

“Getting tired?”

Ed sort of nodded and sort of shrugged.

“Then let’s head back upstairs so you can get some rest. The train’s not going anywhere! At least, this one’s not,” Rambley joked.

He hopped up and helped Ed up- even though Ed didn’t really need help- and gently pushed him towards the hatch. It wasn’t until Ed was climbing out that Rambley clicked everything off and climbed out after him.

When Rambley said ‘get some rest’, Ed was unsure if he was suggesting he was going to leave the park and go home or if he was supposed to crash here on the couch or in his car or something. At this point he would’ve been surprised if Rambley was suggesting he left. So, it was no shock that he wasn’t, instead leading him to the curtained corner.

The curtains were drawn back.

When Rambley had been talking about a den or burrow, he was obviously talking about this specific

little corner of the room. Because Ed was staring at what was either a rat's nest or a hot mess.

Clutter stashed and stored all over the place, folded up stacks of clothes and boxes, and sheets stretched over the top and between them to make a canopy. The bed, which was probably styled like the couches and chairs in being real but whimsical looking, was piled up with so many random pillows and blankets of all shapes, colors, and sizes that he couldn't even see it. Not to mention the plushies sticking out.

Not to mention that the bundle of sheets engulfing it gave a very... burrow look. Very cozy, very claustrophobic.

But that wasn't the only thing in the little room. Directly to the left was a folding table being used as a desk. The desk was much tidier but there was still a lot of stuff on it. There were three screens mounted on the wall behind it, with their cords bundled together under the desk. A little computer setup, neat!

It was like all the madness of a human-sized raccoon was contained behind a flimsy curtain barrier. Ed was both impressed and... no, he was impressed. There had to be a giftshop worth of stuff crammed back here.

“What do you think?” Rambley asked.

“Looks... cozy!” Ed said.

“It is! Maybe a little bit cramped, but it’s got all I need,” Rambley said. He gestured to the bed. “Climb in!”

Ed swung his head to look at Rambley. “Wait, we’re...?” He gestured between them. “We’re bunking together?”

“What?! No, no, no. You’re my guest! You’re taking the bed- I insist!” Rambley quickly corrected. “You get some rest and I’ll keep watch.”

“...You’re going to watch me sleep?” Ed asked before thinking.

“Well, not like that. I’m gonna hook myself back up and make sure everything’s nice and quiet around the park.”

“Oh. Right, thanks. You don’t mind?”

“Nope. It’s my job!”

Ed looked at the weird nest of bedding and sort of shrugged to himself. He kicked off his shoes, shirked off his pack, and started working to climb in. Eventually just flopping on his back on top of all of it.

Rambley was perched on his office chair watching and waiting for a reaction. Ed gave him a thumbs up of approval. It was soft enough, but between where he was and being stared at, he had no idea how he was going to get any sleep.

And then he woke up about five or six hours later.

Ed blinked at the dimly lit ceiling before looking around the room. He found Rambley still in the chair where he left him.

Of course he was now lying face down on the table fast asleep. One arm shielding his face and the other dangling off.

Ed started to sit up and Rambley's ear twitched, and he shot off from the table. He looked to Ed in alarm, but quickly relaxed and slouched back into the desk chair.

"Heeeeeey, Eddie Bedheadie. How'd you sleep?" he slurred.

"Pretty good. How'd you sleep?" Ed asked with a little smile.

"That depends! Did I sleep?" Rambley asked.

It might've been a joke, but with the glazed look in his glassy eyes he might've been sincere.

Apparently he wasn't expecting an answer though,

as he stretched his arms over his head and hopped off the chair.

“How about some breakfast before we get started? Ooh, I’m so excited! You’ll get to see the park in the daytime! You’re going to see how much a little lighting really brightens up the place! It’ll be much safer too. Not that you’re not safe with me, but you should always watch your step-.”

Rambley continued to go off, waking right up and ready to seize the day. Unaware that Ed was already thinking of his eventual plans to leave.

Sure, he would stick around and see this place during the day, but eventually he would have to leave. He would have to check up on his apartment and tell Laura he wasn’t dead in a ditch somewhere. Hadn’t died falling through some weak floorboards or anything.

Eventually he knew that he would have to tell Rambley and Rambley would react in some way.

And then Ed will leave. He'll head back home, order a pizza, eat the pizza, message Laura, screw around for a while, get some work done...

And Rambley will be watching his little train alone.

And Ed's heart sinks again.

Ed knew that he was going to have to rip the band aid off eventually.

He had been putting it off for hours, walking around the square and looking at this safe section of the park in the daylight hours. In the sunlight he could see exactly how rough everything looked, but it at least looked a lot less creepy. Especially with Rambley leading the way.

He wore his little motion capture suit again, and whenever they reached an adequate screen, he would project himself onto it and he and his cartoon counterpart would work in tandem as he chatted about the park.

Ed watched and listened, and tried to pay attention despite the fact he was so distracted.

He would have to leave soon. Between oversleeping and wandering around the park, he was inching closer to the eventual sunset. After what he had ran into around here, he knew it was safest to get out of here before the sun went down, but that meant opening his mouth and telling Rambley he would have to leave.

It was weighing on him, and it only grew heavier the more excited Rambley got showing him all the wonders of his dilapidated park.

It was easy to just watch Rambley being a bundle of energy like he really was watching a mind-numbing cartoon, but it also made those constant creeping reminders harder to swallow. Eventually he would have to say something. Get it over with and get out of here. He just needed the right moment.

Unfortunately for Ed, the perfect opportunity to say something presented itself.

“Well, I think that about wraps up everything on this side of the clock,” Rambley remarked. He rubbed his chin and tapped his foot. “Eh, and it’s a little too late to go venturing back into main street... Tell you what! How about we head back to my place and get a bite to eat? Oh! You liked the cartoons, right? Well, guess who has access to every Rambley cartoon ever made?! That would be me, Rambley! Interested~?”

“Actually, Buddy... I’m thinking I’m going to have to be heading out soon,” Ed admitted. Rubbing the back of his head tensely as he did.

“Huh?” Rambley’s eyes went wide, and his ears lowered back. “Wait, you’re leaving? Right now? This- This soon?”

“I’m afraid so. But I’ll come back! I just need to make sure everything’s okay at my apartment and tell my friends I’m alive. Yeah, I’ll probably be back tomorrow night.”

Rambley stared at him with wide eyes and gritted teeth filled with dread. Like he had just said he hated his cartoon, except that was putting it lightly. Then Rambley was silent for a few long moments.

He expected one of two reactions. Either Rambley would be totally understanding and fine with him going or he would get upset and ask for him to stay. He could even become desperate, not letting him leave. He had all the power at his disposal to shut the front gate and force him to stay.

“Oh...”

But he didn't do that. He didn't do either of those things. His shoulders went slack, his tail tucked in, and he lowered his eyes to the ground. He looked defeated.

“I had a feeling that was coming...”

He sounded defeated too. All the energy instantly dropping out of his voice.

Ed didn't want to make any promises he couldn't keep, but he couldn't stand hearing him sound like this. Next thing he knew he was making them without thinking of the repercussions.

"But I'm coming back! I'll be back tomorrow night, promise. This is just to take care of that stuff."

Rambley nodded but still didn't look up. Eventually sighing and forcing himself to make eye contact.

"Well, if you're sure then I guess... I guess it's better leaving now before it gets any darker. I'll walk you to the entrance."

Ed suddenly had the very vivid mental image of Rambley getting blindsided and mauled by Lloyd while walking back to his tree. His stomach dropped.

"Don't worry about it! I mean, there's no reason both of us should walk all the way over there. I know the way back; you just head home. Maybe you could watch some of those old cartoons you were talking about."

Rambley's eyes momentarily widened again before dropping to the ground again, now looking significantly more hurt. "Right. You're right. Thanks, Eddie."

Ed picked up on his mistake and quickly added, "But I meant- you can still follow me on the screens! I just didn't want you to have to walk that far alone. We'll still get a little more time to hang out."

"Yeah, okay. Sure."

It was clear by that point that Rambley had checked out, but there was nothing Ed could do. All he could do was walk Rambley back to his house.

Which turned out to be a mistake, because when they arrived at the gate Rambley turned to face him with a forced little smile under sad eyes.

"You've gotta at least come in for a snack. Walking aaaaaall the way 'cross the park'll work up an appetite, and we've been hiking all day so- It'll be

quick. Two shakes of a raccoon's tail!" Rambley promised with a little pose and a wink.

But Ed knew if he walked in that house he wouldn't be leaving anytime soon. It would be 'five more minutes' then 'one more cartoon', then 'one more drink', then 'one little nap', and then he'd wake up tomorrow still here and have to start the whole process all over again.

He had to go home. As much as it pained him, he had to break Rambley's little heart.

"I really can't... Sorry, Rambley."

He watched that smile slip right off Rambley's face.

"Oh... Right. That's okay. Maybe next time."

"Tomorrow."

"Right, tomorrow..."

Realizing that Rambley wasn't going to walk off first, Ed gave him a little smile and a wave before turning and walking away. He half expected Rambley to try to stop him, but he didn't. He was almost out of the square when he heard a thump and looked back to see that Rambley was gone and realized that must've been his door closing.

Ed didn't feel good about this, but what other option did he have? He couldn't stay. Rambley would understand when he came back.

He was a little disappointed when there was no response from Rambley on the first screen he passed while heading back into the park proper. He had sort of hoped he would see him off and maybe they could patch things up a little, but apparently not. He continued in silence.

He was passing through a gate- not the main gate but one of the ones separating the segments of the park- and hopping over a stiff turnstile when he was blindsided by a muted screen suddenly coming on beside him.

Unsurprisingly, it was none other than Rambley. He still looked sad.

“There you are. Wow, you got farther than I thought you would. Heh heh, eh, uh...”

Rambley looked away for a long second. All the while Ed was still standing there by the turnstiles listening. He knew there was something coming, so he waited for it.

“You know, I was just thinking about it and... this is pretty far from the entrance gate. You’ll be walking further than you and me walked all day, and it’s getting dark fast... could be things out there. You know what kind of things, the kind of things you don’t want to run into in the dark... Like, ugh, Lloyd.”

Despite what he knew was coming, Ed couldn’t help but crack a grin at that sudden sour note.

This must've perked Rambley's confidence as he began to smile too, and his ears lifted a bit. He looked a little more hopeful.

"I know you're worried about your home and your friend, but it's getting late. Why don't you stay one more night? I know, I know, you're worried and you want to get home, but I promise one more night's not going to be that big of a difference. And then you can leave first thing in the morning! What do you say?"

Ed's smile didn't drop but it got a little more regretful as he shook his head.

"Sorry, but I really can't. I wasn't even supposed to stay all last night. I'm lucky she didn't call the cops!"

Rambley looked alarmed, then his face fell again.

"Oh... Right. That wouldn't be good."

"I'll be back."

“I know. I heard you...”

There was another painfully tense pause before Ed broke it with a quick, “Then don’t worry about it.” Trying to sound casual before continuing along on his way.

He expected Rambley to follow, which he did. He popped along on certain screens as Ed passed them. Rambley was eerily quiet along the way, but he looked sadder than anything else. He just gave up on any effort to talk Ed back to his home and instead just watched him walk to the entrance.

But then something changed in the last leg of the journey. Rambley’s expression switched from sad to something a little more alert. He was watching Ed a little closer, and when Ed looked Rambley would quickly look away. It was a weirdly guilty sort of look.

That confused Ed at first, then made him the slightest bit nervous. It almost looked like Rambley was planning something. Ed thought he was gearing up for another attempt to convince him to stay and

dreaded having to tell him “no” again. He could tell it was hurting Rambley ever time he did.

But then he finally made it to the entrance gate...

...and found it closed.

He couldn't remember if it had closed behind him but seeing it closed now made Ed feel a little uneasy. He turned around to face the screen over the turnstile behind him.

“Rambley, the gate's shut...”

Rambley popped up immediately. His hands springing to his cheeks in surprise.

“It is!? Whoops! Sorry, I shut it earlier. Lemme just get it open...”

The door didn't open. There was a long pause.

“Uh, Rambley?”

“Is it still not open? Gosh, I wonder what’s going on?” Rambley asked. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Hmm... Hold on, let me check!”

Rambley got his ‘loading’ expression, his vacant stare with a slack jaw and spiraling irises. But Ed had the distinct feeling that Rambley was faking it and it made him increasingly nervous.

Finally, Rambley came to with a sympathetic frown.

“Aww, I’m sorry, Eddie! It looks like there was an electrical failure. I can get it fixed in a jiffy! Buuuut it could be a few hours at least. So...” Rambley got a sly smile. “I guess you’re just gonna have to come back to the tree then!”

That mischievous little grin gave him away immediately. It also eased that growing anxiety that Ed had, even though he was now trapped in the park. Maybe. They’d see about that.

“Rambley, open the door,” he said simply.

“I would if I could, Buddy, but a failure like that is a tricky thing,” Rambley said with a downright cocky shake of his head.

Good thing he was a fuzzy little cartoon character. Anyone else might’ve been menacing.

He would have to keep his cool. Figure out a plan, something to get him out of here without completely destroying this little bond with Rambley. After looking around he shrugged and said,

“Guess I have no choice but to climb the wall then.”

Rambley’s eyes popped open. “What?”

“Just have to find something to climb,” Ed continued. He did a little circle, scanning the area. “Guess I could look for a ladder. There’s got to be one.”

“Wait, Eddie. That can’t be safe. Just give me some time, I can get this working!”

“Hey, wait! There’s a lot of boxes sitting around. I could stack them up and make a little staircase and hop right over!”

Rambley was looking increasingly nervous on the screen. That animated sweat appearing on his head again.

“No, there’s- Oh, fine! Let me- Let me take another look at the power...” he mumbled.

He went into a brief loading screen before the gates opened back up and he blipped to a rather peeved look.

“Door’s open,” Rambley said flatly.

“Thanks, Buddy! I knew you could do it!”

Rambley looked away with a puffy cheeked pout and crossed arms. His eyes narrowed in frustration, before widening into sadness, before he shook a little, and before he blurted out-

“Eddie, please stay! I know you want to go home, I know you have things to do, but... but you won’t come back!... And I wouldn’t blame you if you didn’t,” he murmured the last part.

Ed’s smile fell. “Rambley...”

“You’re the first person who’s been here in years, and you’re nice and friendly... You’re my friend. I’ve only known you for two days and you’re actually my friend!” Rambley said with a small smile. “...But...” The smile faded. “But I’m not enough to keep you coming back...”

“Don’t say that.”

“But it’s true! Why would you want to come back when there’s a crazy lion running around a-and a bunch of broke down stuff and exposed wiring?! I can’t even get you a pair of Rambley ears that aren’t below Indigo standards! And don’t get me started on the rides! Who’s going to want to come back when there’s only two functioning rides?! Three at tops!”

Ed could only watch the mini meltdown in shock.

Okay, no more playing around. Rambley wasn't just a little upset that the party had to end, he was truly freaking out here.

He had only known him for one day and considered them friends. If that wasn't a tribute to how lonely Rambley was, then Ed didn't know what was. But he was planning on coming back, he really was! He might've started second guessing that with the whole closed gate cartoon antics thing, but he would've come back regardless. He knew he was going to.

He just needed Rambley to know too.

"Rambley," Ed said. "Rambley, look at me."

Rambley stopped his rant and dared to meet his gaze.

"I will be back tomorrow night."

Ed could've repeated himself a dozen times- he practically had- and Rambley wouldn't have taken them seriously. All he had been hearing was that Ed wanted to go. But he heard and saw that sincerity, that finality.

Maybe Ed really would come back on his own.

...

"...I trust you."

Ed smiled at him and after a hesitation, headed out of the park.

"Good-bye, Eddie..."

Ed stopped for a second. He considered his wording carefully, and then answered.

"See you tomorrow... Trash Panda."

Rambley gasped with his hands jumping to his mouth before narrowing his eyes.

“Did you- Did you just- Oh, that is IT! You better be prepared, Bucko, because by time you get back, I’m going to think up the absolute worst nickname ever!”

Ed gave him a thumbs up and continued out.

Rambley rolled his eyes but got a little smile, but it faded away as he watched Ed walk off. Ed waved one more time at the fence, which Rambley returned, and then disappeared out of sight.

Rambley’s ears drooped and his eyes lowered before the screen went black.

Soon Ed was in his car and driving back towards the highway. It wasn’t until he was driving down the overgrown road leading away from the park that the weight of the last day crashed down. He felt exhausted and restless at the same time, and he couldn’t wait to get home.

It didn’t stop him from stopping to get takeout on the way. He walked into his apartment with his bag of

food and his souvenir filled pack and found the apartment as he left it, like he had just been gone for a few hours.

Eddie's apartment was small but comfortable. There was a living room and kitchen divided by a counter, a simple bathroom, a bedroom, and his office. Nothing too fancy, but comfortable and not cramped.

He dropped off the food on the counter and went straight into the office, putting his pack down before getting on his computer. He quickly logged into Harmony.

Laura was Ed's closest friend. They had known each other since they were kids, and she was one of the only friends who stuck around after high school. She had even been to Indigo Park and if not for her hesitation, could've easily gone with him last night.

She had sent him a message this morning that said simply: "you better not actually be in jail right now."

Okay yes, Laura was worried. He couldn't help but smile at that and quickly typed a response.

“Gay baby jail. I just broke out.”

Then he waited. It could be a while, depending on if Laura was on or not.

He also noticed an in-computer sticky note he had typed up with questions to solve on his great exploration of Indigo Park. Why did it close? What was left? Funny, he realized. He met Rambley the Raccoon himself and didn't ask him what had happened to the place. Though at the time it was because he was choosing his words carefully... for the most part.

He scooted the chair over to his pack and brought it back to the desk, then unzipped it and started to shift through and unload some of the stuff.

He got out the Rambley Raction Figure and set it beside the one he already had. Then he got out the Golden Rambley plush and sat it on his desk, then

propped it back up when it fell over. Cute. Cheap gimmick, but cute enough. Maybe it was worth a small fortune on Ebay. Not that he planned on selling it unless he got really desperate.

There was an alert from Harmony and Ed looked to his leftmost screen to see the message that appeared.

“Goddamn it Ed.”

He grinned at that and scooted up to the desk, watching the dots signaling that Laura was still typing.

“So what happened? You didn’t stay there all night did you?”

“It’s a long story lol,” Ed typed back.

“OK.”

Okay, go ahead was what she meant.

He considered what to do. He didn't want to lie to her but giving her the truth- she wouldn't believe the truth, and even if she did it might be dangerous. He considered his options and finally decided there was only one thing to do.

"It was crazy. You're not going to believe this."

He told her the truth.

"I got to the park and who do I run into but Rambley the Raccoon. He lets me in and gives me a Critter Cuff so I can go on the rides. But the only one working was that little train one. So I'm riding the train with Rambley and I see something out the corner of my eye but I don't know what it is. We finish the train and Rambley says, "Hey, go to the theater". So I go to the theater and right on the stage is the scariest thing I've ever seen. It's a hyper realistic Lloyd the Lion covered in blood and with black eyes. It runs up and grabs me by the arm but then my Critter Cuff makes a dog whistle and scares it off. I left and I go over to Mollie's place and I'm running around in that playground. You know the

one with all the tubes and the ball pit. I ran into the thing I saw earlier. It's a hyper realistic blood covered Mollie! So, I start running and jumping, and she's right on my heels! But then I get through this door and it slams shut and pops her head off and blood sprays EVERYWHERE. And Rambley's there and he says, "Hey, sorry about that. Let's go over to Finley place." We go to the Oceanic Odyssey and there's this HUGE Finley swimming around and it tries to eat me but I get away. Then I run around for a while but THEN I run into this office and I find out the whole park is being controlled by the real Rambley the Raccoon. And he tells me, "Congratulations! You are the first guest ever to find me!" And then he took me to his house and we ate cereal and watched trains. Then I fell asleep and I just got home."

With the knowledge that she wasn't going to believe him. And that was for the best, for now.

"Wow."

Oh yeah. She didn't believe him.

“Ya it was nuts. I’d give it five stars.”

“you went and met Rambley without me. I am shocked. I thought we were friends?!?!”

“lol no. I’m friends with Rambley now.”

He looked over at the Rambley action figure and plush then continuing typing.

“I got a bunch of stuff tho if you want any of it. Like plushies and stuff.”

“YES. Any Salem stuff?”

“Not yet but I’m going back tomorrow.”

Ed sent the message and only realized a second too late that maybe he shouldn’t have said that.

Because now that he scouted it, Laura might feel up to coming and exploring the park. That would be a disaster.

He watched those loading dots with growing dread until the message finally appeared.

“bring me back any Salem stuff! I don’t care how old it is. I still have my Salem packed up in my closet and I need one that doesn’t have a big funky poop stain on it.”

It was, in fact, a chocolate stain from a summer where it sat in a backpack with a melted candy bar, but the two had the running joke because of how it looked.

More importantly it didn’t sound like she was planning on going. He breathed a sigh of relief and sent her a thumbs up emoji.

“If I don’t message when I get back it’s just cause I got home late. Or I’m hiding from the cops in some bushes. Or I’m dead.”

With that typed he pushed back from the desk and got up to get some of the takeout.

He wondered how Rambley was holding up.
Probably was watching his trains. A sad thought, but
it was good to know he had a distraction.

He lasted this long without Ed, what was one night?

...

Ed was gone. But he would be back!

He said he had to go home and do some stuff, but
he would be back.

Rambley could've stopped him. He would be back.

He said it, he meant it, it was a done deal. Yet
Rambley had never felt so defeated. He sulked in
front of his screens for a little while before retreating
into his nest.

The next day he felt empty. He ate a bowl of rations,
then another, then another, then he felt sick and
passed out in the basement beside his little train set.

As the sun went down, Rambley felt a little livelier. That is, he dragged himself out of the basement and got himself hooked up to start cycling through the cameras. No sign of Ed yet, but then again it had only gotten a little dark. There was still plenty of time.

He'd be back tonight. He'd be back tonight. He'd be back. He'd be back.

He knew in the back of his mind that it was weird to be this fixated on a guest but it had been so long since he had seen anyone else. Especially someone who wasn't behind a rope or a pane of glass. Someone who was real, who he could talk to and touch.

And oh wow, that physical contact was something Rambley had started to like a lot. He didn't know how he had gone so long without it.

Rambley reached up and patted his own head like Ed had, dragging his hand down to his cheek and holding it there.

It wasn't the same.

"Too clingy," he grumbled. "I was too clingy and I drove him away. Ugh..."

But he couldn't help it! How long had it been since someone else had been here? Since that day at least. Everyone left that day. Not just the guests, but the staff. As far as he knew everyone up and left.

Two-thousand, nine-hundred, and twenty days.

Eight years.

He had been alone here. Mollie wasn't right, she avoided him like the plague. Finley didn't recognize him. Salem did recognize him and he had been dodging them since. And Lloyd... Ugh, Lloyd.

That day. That day had been the trainwreck that derailed the park. He remembered it so well and yet didn't know what happened.

Suddenly there was screaming and people yelling. Sterile emergency announcements blared overhead telling people to evacuate the park. Rambley hadn't seen what happened. He had been unhooked from the cameras for Meet and Greets so all he caught was the fallout afterwards.

“Oh no... Oh no, no! What did he do?!” he remembered yelling. “He scratched someone, didn't he?! I knew it! Ugh, why did they give him real cat claws?”

He had been so sure it was Lloyd and, thinking back now, it might've been. But he also thought it was as simple as someone getting spooked and everyone leaving the park for damage-control purposes.

He should've known something was wrong when a Rangler ran from him when he ran to them to ask what was going on. Which was against the rules, of course, but this was an emergency and he couldn't get back on the cameras until the Meet and Greet was for sure over! They ran from him like he had

done it, but he hadn't done anything! He wouldn't have ever hurt anyone.

That wasn't him.

He did wise up enough to get back on the system, if only to take over for the automated systems and kindly calm down the remaining guests and encourage them to head for the exits.

“So sorry to cut your day short, but don't you worry! Your next visit is on ME! Make sure to bring your Critter Cuff back with you for major discounts and freebies throughout the whole park!”

As was company policy. Something goes wrong, let them come back in free. Give them a smile on the house. They'll be back eventually.

They didn't ever come back. The last people he saw before Ed were police officers leaving the park and after that, nothing. Nobody even wanted to come see what the place looked like. They were all gone.

Thank goodness Rambley knew where supplies were or he might've starved. For a while he made an effort to feed the others, but none of them acted right. He always had to keep his distance, leave food where they could find it.

He stopped after the first time he found remains. Mollie had killed and ate a deer that wandered into the park- at least, he had hoped it wandered in. He had become increasingly more concerned that they were somehow getting out and hunting in the woods around the park. At least they weren't starving, but it made him increasingly nervous of what else they might've hunted.

He didn't want them to starve, but... he was afraid of them. His friends, AI turned creatures just like him, and he was too afraid to approach even though he had the means to drive them away.

But really, they weren't his friends. His friends were Mollie Macaw and Finley the Sea Serpent, and those things out there weren't them. They were just... wild animals that looked like them.

They were the only company he had in the park. Them and his trains. The trains almost felt alive with how they buzzed around the track, but it wasn't enough.

And then he had to go do something dumb like let the first guy who walked in here in EIGHT YEARS walk back out. What a plan. What a trash panda level plan.

Rambley was in the middle of slouching into his hand with his eyes closed, flicking through and looking through the various cameras in his head, when it happened. It happened so suddenly that it startled him.

He got an alert. The twitching internal signal alerting that someone was at the front gate.

In an instant he jumped to that screen and came face to face with the would-be trespasser. The same would-be trespasser he had been face to face with the day before.

“Eddie!” On the screen Rambley’s eyes grew sparkly and his hands balled into excited little fists. “Eddie, you’re back!” he cheered.

Just seeing his reaction caused Ed to break into a wider smile.

“I told you I’d be back,” he said.

“And I didn’t doubt you for a second!”

Sure, he didn’t.

Rambley also took notice through the cameras that Ed hadn’t come empty handed. He had a flat cardboard box in one hand and a plastic bag hanging from the other.

“Ooh, and whatcha got there? Wait, no, don’t tell me- show me! In person, I mean. You still know the way to my house, right?”

Ed nodded.

“Then what are you waiting for? Come on in!”

The screen cut to black as Rambley opened the gates, and Ed headed on inside.

All things considered, Ed decided to forgo the slow train ride and climb over the rubble. It took some working and probably could've given him tetanus if he wasn't careful, but he made it through with the stuff and continued into the park proper.

Occasionally when he was passing a screen Rambley would pop up, rambling about how excited he was to have him there and how they were going to have the best time. But he seemed preoccupied, and the Rambley on screen stayed largely idle. It stood in the center opening and closing its mouth but doing little to no emoting. Ed suspected he had taken his motion capture suit off.

This was confirmed when he finally made it to the square and found Rambley waiting for him at his gate. His red bandana tied in a neat bow and his fur

all combed, and waving with both hands like he was excitedly flagging down a low-flying plane.

“Hey there, Rangler! Long time no see,” Rambley called through his hands. He clasped them together as he looked up at him with doe eyes. “Didja miss me?”

“The whole time.”

“D’aww!” Rambley cooed. Then rubbed his hands together. “Okay, okay, show me what you got!”

Ed grinned and brought the box down, fumbling with the bags hanging on his fingers to open it up and reveal what was inside. What was clearly printed on the top of the box but Rambley either didn’t notice or was purposefully pretending he didn’t.

“You brought pizza?!! Oh wow! Can I have some?!”

“You can have the whole thing if you want. I brought it to split,” Ed said.

Rambley's eyes went wide, and he seemed to short-circuit for a second before shaking his head and getting a knowing grin.

"You don't mean that."

"...Okay, no. I'm calling dibs on at least three of them. Maybe four, I'll keep you posted."

"Well, if we're calling dibs then this one's mine!"

Rambley started to reach into the box for the biggest slice only to pause. He silently looked up like he was asking for permission. It confused Ed so he just nudged the pizza box closer. Rambley's toothy grin returned in full and he snatched up the piece like nothing had happened, leaving Ed even more perplexed by it.

"Ooooh, I've always wanted to try one of these babies! I know I should savor it, but I just can't wait!" Rambley chirped. He sunk his teeth into the cheesy pizza and hummed in delight. "Mmm, it's as sinfully greasy as I imagined!"

If there were any words that Ed didn't expect to hear coming out of that mouth, other than swears, it was those.

Maybe it was the way his ears twitched as he nibbled on his pizza, but Ed had the inexplicable urge to pat his head. He knew it was weird- Rambley might've been fuzzy, but he was basically just a furry human. It would be just as weird as if he reached out and patted Laura on the head.

...Forget it. He was going to go for it. He slowly reached out his hand-

"Mmph!"

Rambley raised his head suddenly and Ed yanked his arm back. The raccoon didn't even seem to notice him, instead chewing and swallowing fast.

"Wait, what am I doing? We're a couple of sitting ducks out here with this thing! Come on-." Rambley zipped behind Ed and began to push him towards

the house, looking around paranoid. “Let’s get you inside, Pizza Man.”

Ed didn’t fight it and let himself get led right back into the tree house. Funny enough, it was actually kind of nice to be back. He could get used to it.

And better still, he had a feeling it would be easier to leave tomorrow now that Rambley knew he would return.

All the while Rambley was already concocting ways to convince him to stay longer.

It had been almost a week since Ed had first arrived at Indigo Park and had met Rambley, and they had started a sort of routine.

Ed would go to Indigo Park to stay the night with Rambley. The next day he would leave, even if Rambley would still try to persuade him not to, come home, get to work, and then spend the night at his apartment. Then the next morning he’d get up, do

what he needed to throughout the day, and then return to the park to repeat the cycle.

Progress on rebuilding the park, as per Rambley's desires, had not begun yet. Which was probably for the best as Ed had no idea where they were even supposed to start.

He wasn't sure if he'd be able to keep up this pace forever, but for now it was working.

Rambley still went through the motions of trying to convince him to stay every time he tried to leave. Though there had been some improvements. He hadn't pleaded with him since that first day he left, and he hadn't shut the doors or faked not being able to open them since then either. That was progress. At least it made Ed less nervous.

So, on the whole things had been going good. No problems at all... Until today.

Ed had noticed something was wrong the day before but shrugged it off. He blamed the sore throat and tiredness on the late stream and just turned in early.

And then woke up late with a heavy body, a dull throb in his head, an even scratchier throat, and the all-around feeling that something was seriously wrong. It took him a grand total of two seconds of assessment before he decided he probably had the flu.

Ed felt sick. Not sick enough to go to the doctor- it was that familiar sort of sick that didn't worry him enough to combat the desire to not want to go sit in a waiting room- but just sick enough to feel like roadkill.

Normally this wouldn't be a big deal. He'd just roll around on the couch trying to find a comfortable position, sleep for most of the day, and scrounge up some medicine he had in the bathroom for when the symptoms got too bad. Maybe even break open a can of soup. It didn't taste as good as homemade, but it was good enough.

Except for one problem.

Rambley.

Tonight was the night when he was supposed to return to Indigo Park and visit Rambley again. Alright, no big deal. He could call and reschedule.

Except, no he couldn't. Rambley didn't have a working phone or any other viable lines of communication. Unless he walked up to the front gate he couldn't send a message. Well, whatever. Rambley would understand.

Except, no he wouldn't. Because this sickness crept up on Ed fast. It would be one thing if he told Rambley he was coming down with something, but he didn't. So, Rambley would think he just didn't come.

It would be one day. Maybe Rambley could just suck it up and handle it.

...No. Ed couldn't nor wouldn't do that to him.

After a while of laying around, he concocted the plan to drive to Indigo Park, walk up to the front gate all sick and sore, tell Rambley he was too sick to come in, leave, and try again tomorrow. There. It would still mean he would have to drive out there, but at least then Rambley would be aware of what was going on. Sounded like a plan.

It wasn't until Ed was peeling himself off the couch to get ready to go that he started to feel bad about it again. Rambley would understand, but that didn't mean he would be happy with the arrangement. He would probably mope and then Ed would come back home and worry about him all night.

Maybe he could suck it up and stay? It wasn't like Rambley would want to leave the house after it got dark. They'd probably just watch cartoons and trains, and then he'd listen to Rambley chatter through the rest of the night. It wasn't much different from laying her half-listening to the TV.

There it was: he could either sit here at his apartment sick or go to Indigo Park, have the most excruciating hike through it, and then sit at Rambley's house sick. At least then he wouldn't have to worry about Rambley.

It was settled. Forget the flu, he was sticking to the original schedule. He sat up, laid back down for about ten more minutes, and then got up again and got some stuff ready to go.

Normally he brought some extra food and stuff to show Rambley, but in this case he just threw in whatever over-the-counter medicine was shoved in his bathroom cabinet, a can of soup, a bottle of sports drink, and then slid on his shoes and a jacket and left. He didn't even change out of his t-shirt and pajama bottoms. It wasn't like anyone was going to see him other than a raccoon who was only wearing nothing but a spiffy bandana.

Thankfully, as bad as Ed felt it didn't affect his driving any. He got to Indigo Park in one piece and stepped out of his car only to immediately stumble.

He pulled his jacket tighter, grabbed his bag, and started heading for the front gate.

Despite how awful he felt and how much he regretted his decision to come out here, he brightened up the moment Rambley appeared on the entrance screen.

“Welcome back, Buddy! You’re just in time! Oooh, and I see you brought your jammies. I guess someone’s excited for our sleepover!” Rambley said with a sly, knowing grin. He gestured his arms to the door. “You just come on in! You know where the place is. Oh, I can’t wait! I’ve got a big surprise for you!”

With that, Rambley disappeared. No chance to tell him he wasn’t staying, which meant no chance to back out. He didn’t even seem to notice the state Ed was in. Maybe that was for the best, he thought. He headed on inside.

It took him longer than usual to navigate through the rubble and get to Rambley’s house. In fact, after

climbing over the rubble, Ed was pretty much exhausted and staggered most of the way to the treehouse.

He really hoped Rambley's surprise was a quiet one.

Rambley met him at the front gate as usual, waving him in with a big grin.

"There's the man of the hour! Welcome home, Eddie! Huh. You're looking a little funny today. Did you do something with your hair?"

If 'did something' meant not comb or brush or touch it in any way, then yes. Ed covered quickly.

"I just slipped on the way in here."

"Did you climb the rubble again? That's so dangerous! Why not just take the train? I can run it without my second skin on."

Apparently Rambley forgot about the rubble he had to climb just to get to the train, but Ed decided to not bring that up.

“Yeah, but it’s not the same if you’re not fully there,” he said instead.

“Aww, shucks.” Rambley sheepishly tugged at his bandana before giving a little fist pump. “Then that’s the first thing we’ll do tomorrow! It’s a date.” He winked.

It was moments like that that made Ed think Rambley was flirting with him.

“Well, come on in!”

Rambley opened the fence gate and gave a gesturing bow towards the door. Ed smiled and passed by, and when he did Rambley noticed something instantly. His beaming smile dropped in confusion, and then surprise, and little did Ed know but Rambley was slowly following and eyeing him as he headed inside.

Ed didn't realize anything was up at all until he turned back and saw the nervous look on his face.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Eddie, you're... you're sick," Rambley said in shock.

"What? No."

"Yes, you are! I can smell it on you."

Ed blinked at that. "You can smell it...?"

"Here, sit down! Right here, on the couch," Rambley said.

He grabbed Ed's hand as he did and all but dragged him to the stunted piece of furniture. Ed dropped onto it a little too hard and felt it through most of his body.

Rambley took notice of how pink Ed's cheeks were. He couldn't believe he hadn't seen it before and

mentally chastised himself for not paying more attention when Ed showed up in pajamas of all things. How could he not notice?

He wrung his hands together anxiously and guiltily.

“You shouldn’t have come if you were sick. I... I would understand,” he said

“No, I wanted to come. I’ve just been sitting at home sick,” Ed assured. Though now the hoarseness in his voice and how tired he sounded were much more apparent. “It’s no big deal. I’m alright.”

“Somehow, I don’t think ‘alright’ covers this one,” Rambley said flatly. He planted his hands on his hips. “Did you bring a thermometer?”

Ed pulled off his pack which was still on his back, not even making the effort to take it off, and dug around in the bottom for what he brought. His brows shot up as he produced a white stick.

“I can’t believe I did.”

“Oh, good! Good thinking, Rangler,” Rambley said. He then plucked the thermometer from his hand and pulled the cap off before holding it up. “Open up. Ah.”

Ed raised his brows again.

“Ahhh.”

Well, looked like they were doing this. Ed opened his mouth and Rambley popped the thermometer in and clicked the button.

“Now you just keep that right under your tongue, and this’ll be over in a jiffy!”

Ed didn’t know whether to be insulted by Rambley treating him like a kid or endeared by it. Eh, leaning more towards endeared.

The thermometer began to beep and Rambley plucked it out. He read the numbers and his eyes widened and ears tilted back.

“Yeesh! Take a look at that! You have a raging fever!”

“Oh yeah? What is it?” Ed asked.

“101.2!”

“That doesn’t sound that bad.”

“It is. Trust me, I have an extensive knowledge of first aid,” Rambley said matter-of-factly.

He popped the cap back on the thermometer and handed it back. Ed somewhat carelessly dropped it back into his bag.

“Wait, really?”

“I wasn’t always a mascot, remember? I used to be one of the, uh... “operators” of the park,” Rambley said, using air quotes. “And one of my jobs was registering any first aid calls in the park. I am qualified- err- I am aware of how to apply basic first

aid, diagnosing common ailments, and have a major in compression care for major wounds and defibrillation.”

“...Are... Are you saying you could shock me back to life?”

“No, but I could tell someone how to,” Rambley dismissed. Before Ed could ask further, the raccoon interrupted with a clap. “So! Nurse Rambley here for duty. As long as you’re under my roof you are under my care, and considering the circumstances you’re going to be under this roof until we get that fever down. Capiche?”

“So, like Misery,” Ed joked without thinking.

Thankfully the comment flew straight over Rambley’s head.

“What? No! You’ll feel way better after a little rest! Unless it’s something more serious, but your moderate fever, glassy eyes, raspy throat, and general malaise makes me suspect that you might

have the flu. This is flu season you know! Which would match the smell too... Well, come on. Why don't we get you tucked in?"

"You mean into your bed? I don't want to take your bed, and I really don't want to spread this all over it. I'll be fine on the couch." Ed looked down at the short, stunted couch. Remembering that there was a reason why he had been bringing a sleeping bag with him, a sleeping bag that was currently back in his trunk. "...Or, you know, I could just crash on those pillows in the basement..." he mumbled.

"No way, Jose! There's way too much dust down there and with your breathing compromised it's just going to make everything much worse!" Rambley fussed, but then smiled. "Don't worry about me. I've never gotten sick! As a matter of fact, I don't think I can." He thoughtfully tapped his chin before ushering Ed to stand. "Up, up!"

Ed didn't really feel like putting up a fight, so he got up, leaving his bag on the couch, and staggered after Rambley.

He would've willingly collapsed on that nest of sheets and passed out for the next ten hours if not for him noticing the bathroom door as he passed by. He had an idea.

"Hey, do you mind if Jose hoses down first?" Ed joked.

"Heh, very funny! But are you sure you're up to it?"

"It's bad enough I'm going to be taking your bed, I don't want to stink it up too."

Rambley laughed a little

"Okay, okay! When you put it like THAT, help yourself! But be warned, the hot water heater went out five years ago." Rambley sighed with disappointment. "So, it's going to be chilly... Hey, wait. Wait, that would be perfect!" He perked right back up. "Hop on in- just don't stay in too long!"

"Thanks. Do you have a towel?"

“Mm-hm!”

Rambley raced off and returned, not with a towel but with a sheet. Ed kind of stared at it for a second, his sluggish brain processing it.

“I do have towels, but they need to be cleaned. This’ll work a whole lot better, trust me!”

Ed wasn’t that picky, especially when he was feeling like hot mush. So, he shrugged to himself and accepted the sheet.

“Thanks.”

“No problem! Oh, and before you go. I saw you had some bottles in your bag that looked an awful lot like medicine bottles. Mind if I take a look?”

“Knock yourself out.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to look that hard,”
Rambley said with a cheeky grin. It successfully got

another smile out of Ed before he squeezed himself into the bathroom cubical.

The second that door closed, Rambley beelined for that bag and began digging through it.

Yup, like he suspected there were medicine bottles. It was all over-the-counter stuff, but they could make that work. Some Tylenol, some Ibuprofen, and even some cough syrup. Maybe he could mix that with a little Bird Up syrup to take the bitter edge off. Ed would surely appreciate it!

But this did concern Rambley because while he knew Ed was a perfectly intelligent individual, he had been really hoping that Ed simply hadn't realized how sick he was. That this had been some big misunderstanding instead of Ed willingly going through the damp, poorly maintained park.

All this medicine begged to differ, as did the sports drink and the can of soup. Ed knew he was sick. He knew he was sick and he still came over here. Rambley couldn't believe he would risk his health

climbing a bunch of rebar and cement when he was-!

Wait a minute.

Wait a minute, he brought all of his stuff with him.

Had... he wanted Rambley to take care of him?

No, no! That wasn't it. He probably just came by because he didn't want to miss out on their super-fun sleepover! Or, uh, of course, maybe he was a little worried about Rambley, but still- It had to be one of those.

There was a shout and Rambley looked over his shoulder at the bathroom door. His ears up at alert, only to twitch as they detected the sound of running water. He must've gotten blindsided by how cold the water was. Rambley snickered a little despite knowing that he really shouldn't be laughing at his sick friend's misfortune.

...

Maybe...

Maybe he did want Rambley to take care of him. Or at least brought the stuff along to take care of himself. Obviously, he wasn't doing a great job if he decided to take the cave-in shortcut to get here. So... maybe he needed Rambley to step in. Well, since he was here. Maybe he could! He did have first-aid experience, even if he pretty much never had much chance to use it. He could do it! He could help!

Maybe Ed needed that help.

...Or maybe just he didn't want to be alone.

Then that tears it! With fiery determination in his eyes and a dramatic clench of his fists, Rambley decided then and there that he was going to take care of Ed through his sickness. And not only that- be the best caretaker he had ever had! He'd put his own Ma to shame- Rambley was sure the lady was

nice. Ed had said her favorite character was Mollie, so she had to be. She looked like it in the picture.

Ed came to him. To his doorstep in this state. It was Rambley's duty as his friend to nurse him back to health!

With that decision, he put everything back into the pack and carried it into his bedroom nest. He fluffed up the bedding and moved some stuff around before returning and waiting for Ed to come out.

Eventually he did, his hair still damp and his clothes a little disheveled. Admittedly he looked, and felt, a little worse than when he went in. Now he was actively shivering but also had this gross hot sensation on his skin along with the chill.

"There you are, Buddy! How'd it go?"

It was probably the worst shower he ever had.

He gave Rambley a half-hearted mumble and a thumbs up.

“That’s great! Just leave the sheet wherever and come this’a’way! The bed’s all ready for you,”
Rambley chirped.

“Tha-.” Ed cut off to cough into his fist. “Thanks,
Buddy.”

A bed was sounding really good right now.

As Ed shuffled past the sheets it dawned on him that there was no way he could make the trip back out of Indigo Park right now. He really was stuck here until this lightened up. It spooked him, causing him to slow down even though his mind was racing.

If something showed up, something like Lloyd, he’d be in serious trouble. He would’ve thought dealing with Mollie and outmaneuvering Finley would’ve made him less nervous, but this realization drained any confidence away.

A gentle push on his back encouraged him to keep going. Ah well. At least Lloyd couldn't smell him anymore, maybe. Hopefully. God, he was tired.

The only reason he didn't crumple over and land face first on the bed was because he didn't want to jar his already pounding head. He sat down on the foot instead, about to lay down when Rambley popped up beside him with the thermometer back in hand.

"Okay, Big Guy. Let's see if that shower brought down that fever," Rambley said. He gently popped the thermometer back into Ed's mouth. Then he felt his forehead with the back of his hand- Ed's eyes widened a little but he otherwise didn't react- and frowned. "Hmm. I guess it didn't take it down as much as I thought. You must be raging if you were under all that cold water and you're still hot!"

He yanked up the bag from the floor.

"Time for some medicine! When was your last dose?"

“Uh... I don’t know. Afternoon?” Ed guessed. “I think, uh... It was sometime around four, maybe? I took a little before I left.”

“Oh well, I’m sure you didn’t take that much. A little more won’t hurt!”

Rambley began to hum as he dipped back into the bag and dug around and ended up spotting an unfamiliar bottle. One that stood out because of his shape but went unnoticed earlier. He pulled it out.

“Hey, wait a second. What’s this?... Oh, it’s just more Motrin. Well, that might help bring the- hey, wait a second! This is- Eddie, this is children’s Motrin!” Rambley revealed.

“...Oh.”

Ed’s poor attempt to pretend to be surprised didn’t go unnoticed.

“Eddie, you’re an adult. You need a way higher dose than this!”

“I, uh...”

...

“I like the taste.”

Rambley gave him an unimpressed, unsubtle, ‘Are you serious?’ look.

Then he slowly returned the bottle to the bag.

“I’m just going to hide this where you can’t find it.”

Ed must’ve been delirious, because he started to crack-up at that. Rambley gave him a flat look and got out the proper medicine- the adult strength stuff- and drink and passed them over one at a time. Ed swallowed a couple of Tylenols, nearly choked them both back up, and then swigged them down with the still mildly cool drink.

“There you go! Now, can I get you anything? I saw you brought a can of soup. How’s about I warm that up for ya?” Rambley asked. His eager-to-please smile back.

“Sure. If you don’t mind, thanks.”

“I don’t mind one bit! You just sit tight and leave it to me!” Rambley said. He patted Ed on the head. Then he patted again, and again. “Ooo, your hair is so soft!” he gushed.

Damp too, but that didn’t seem to bother him. He just kept patting at the wet curls until he caught sight of Ed amused grin and realized what he was doing.

“OH! S-Sorry! I got carried away there.” He snatched his hand back with a sheepish smile, his eyes darting around. “I-I’ll just get right on that soup!”

He then all but bolted out from the sheets.

And then he proceeded to speedwalk back in to actually grab the can, shaking it at Ed before turning and hurrying out again.

Ed then proceeded to slouch back onto the bed like his bones had liquified. Like he had been barely holding himself up.

Honestly, he sort of felt like he was. The fact that he was still catching his breath after laughing was not normal. Ed had been regularly exercising for years, he couldn't remember the last time he had been this wiped.

...He was glad he came though. Trapped in a dangerous amusement park or not, this was already way better than laying on his couch feeling like he was shriveling up.

It wasn't long before Rambley returned with a bowl of soup. Though instead of passing it to Ed, he disappeared behind a stack of boxes. Ed heard some rustling and followed the noise up until a sheet drew back beside him to reveal Rambley standing

beside the bed. He pushed back a few more sheets and stirred the soup.

“This smells so good! It’s hot though, so let me juuust...”

He brought up a spoonful and began blowing on it, and that was when Ed realized what he was doing.

“Buddy, I can feed myself. I’m not that sick,” Ed said with a lopsided grin. “But thanks.”

“It’s no trouble! I wouldn’t be a nurse worth my salt if I couldn’t do something as simple as feeding you. That’s Get Well-ology 101!” Rambley said. He spun the spoon proudly.

And ended up splattering soup across his face.

“Why did I do that? Eugh,” he mumbled. He tried to wipe it off on his arm.

“Cute,” Ed said. His fever loosening his tongue.

Rambley flashed him a toothy smile. “I know you are, but what am I?”

...Okay, Rambley was definitely flirting with him.

Though Ed didn't even have a second to process it before a second spoonful of soup was thrust in his face.

“Here comes the train!”

It looked like Rambley was absolutely determined to do this, so Ed sort of shrugged to himself and let himself be fed. It was weird, that's for sure, an adult being spoon-fed by an oversized raccoon, but it was a nice gesture. It reminded him of when he was a kid and his mom used to take care of him. Just thinking about it made his heart hurt.

He tried to block it out. Pay attention to Rambley, who was happily humming away and smiling to himself. Once he was done, he plopped the empty bowl on a box directly to his left without taking his eyes off Ed.

“Good job, Buddy! And now that you’re done, let’s do something to make you feel even better! I could probably carry one of my screens over here pretty easily if you’d like to watch some toons. Or, ooo, we can play a game! I can break out the Connect Four!” Rambley offered.

“Uh...”

Ed was still looking a little out of it. If how long it took him to form a response didn’t give it away.

“Hmm. On second thought, why don’t you get some sleep? We can save the games for after the medicine starts working,” Rambley said.

“That’s okay?”

“Of course that’s okay! You need all the rest and recuperation you can get.”

Rambley made quickish work of tucking the blankets he was laying on up and around him. Like he was

trying to make a cocoon of bedding for him, or more likely just not wanting to make him move to cover him properly.

Now I'm going to be right over there keeping an eye out, so if you need anything, anything at all, just give me a shout!"

Rambley ruffled Ed's hair with a little giggle before ducking back under the sheets. His hands reached out from behind a sheet and grabbed the bowl a second afterwards. There was some bumping and scuffling, then the clatter of the bowl on Rambley's table and the small squeak as he hopped into his office chair.

Ed tilted his head enough to see Rambley's tail before the room started to shift weirdly. He laid back on the pillow to stifle the budding dizzy spell and ran a hand down his face. Still clammy, still sweaty, even after the shower.

He needed some rest. He closed his eyes and forced himself to relax...

...

Ed wasn't sure how much longer it was when he woke up except that the Tylenol must've kicked in because he wasn't feeling nearly as bad. He was a lot sweatier and uncomfortably warm, but his head wasn't hurting so much and all over ache had lightened up considerably. He wasn't sure how long he slept though.

He was going to push down the blankets a little more when he noticed something in his right hand. Something warm holding onto his.

He looked down to see Rambley's hand grasped onto his, his fingers curled around Ed's.

Ed's eyes widened and then followed up the fluffy grey arm to a lump of sheets. He reached out and carefully pulled then back to find, as expected, Rambley underneath.

He was sleeping like he had at his desk, sitting beside the bed with his head resting on his other arm on it. His ear twitched a little as the sheet was pulled away, but he didn't wake up.

How long had he been holding his hand? Had he come over as soon as he fell asleep or only after he had gotten tired? Ed guessed it really didn't matter. He had been here, that's all that counted.

Ed couldn't resist. He reached out slowly, carefully, and gently pet his head. Trying his hardest not to wake him when he looked so peaceful but unable to turn down the temptation.

His fur was just as soft as ever and tickled his palm. Rambley mumbled contently and tilted his head into the touch, his hand tightening a little around Ed's.

"Aren't I adorable?!" had Rambley asked once. He was talking about a plush, but in this case- yes. Yes, he was.

Poor guy was too good for this world. Or at least too good to be sitting alone and abandoned at a rundown amusement park. Waiting for the first rando to come by and throwing all his attention onto them. Rambley was lonely, that much was sure. His friends were gone, the guests were gone, and when Ed wasn't here it was just him and his trains. It had to ache.

Ed knew exactly what that sort of loneliness felt like. He was in a good place now, but he could remember a time when he had only one friend and nobody else...

How could anyone just leave Rambley here though? Well... Ed still hadn't asked Rambley why they shut down, or why they had left him behind when they did. Likely Rambley hid and they couldn't find him, Ed told himself... but there was a part of him that was almost nervous about the answer he might receive. Why Rambley was the only one left.

Rambley's eyes opened a sliver.

Ed was caught red handed.

For a long second, he just sat there with his hand paused on Rambley's head, knowing he should probably pull his hand back but instead just hanging there waiting for a reaction.

Rambley's reaction was a lopsided smile, and suddenly Ed felt especially like he had got caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

"Hey, Buddy," Rambley slurred. He propped his head up on one hand and gave him a half-awake yet downright impish look. "Whatcha dooin'?"

Ed had to think fast to not make this weird. Something. Anything.

"Patting my life-sized limited edition Rambley plush."

Anything but that.

But Rambley snickered, so apparently he got the joke. Or the joke was bad enough that it gave him the giggles.

“Feeling any better?” he asked.

“A little bit.”

“Good enough to take a look at my super-secret spectacular surprise?”

Ed considered it. “...Depends on how far it is.”

“How about the foot of the bed?”

“I could barely make it.”

“That works for me!” Rambley said.

He then hopped up and disappeared behind the sheets. By time Ed shuffled down to the end of the bed, Rambley was back in his chair. He rested his arms on the table in front of him with his fingers laced and stared at the screen before him, and it

started flickering through pages and screens like he was manipulating it.

Well, that explained how he controlled it without a keyboard. He was using the chip in his head. Ed had wondered about that. Neat!

“So, I was doing a little detective work last night and I remembered that Indigo Park used to save a picture on record from every photo session at the Meet & Greet. They’ve been doing that since, gosh, since the park first opened! Sometimes they’d even use those happy smiles in promotional videos or during the Anniversarambley-travaganza! Boy, that’s a mouthful. And then I remembered that you used to come to the park and visited Mollie at her Meet & Greet. Sooo, that means...?”

“That there’s a photo of me somewhere in there?”
Ed finished.

“That’s right! So, I’ve got one question...”

Rambley suddenly pushed himself out of the way and splayed his hand towards the screen.

“Is this you?”

Ed recognized the boy in the blue skull hoodie and the woman in the beige sweater instantly. His eyes widening.

“That’s... That’s me.”

“I knew it! You’ve got no idea how long it took me to find this! I had to search through hundreds upon hundreds of Meet & Greet photos. You wouldn’t believe how many Critter Cuffs were registered to ‘Ed’! Or Eddie. Or Edward. Edgar. Edmund. There was, like, a TON of Eds I had to go through.”

His picture had been saved here all this time?
Rambley was actually able to find it?

Ed was still reeling while Rambley was listing off all the effort he had to make to dig up this old photo.

“-But then I found it and, oh boy, I KNEW it was you! A little Eddie! D’aww, you were so cute! Was Mollie your favorite? I know you said she was your Mom’s- oh, and your Mom! She looks so nice!”

Ed got a small smile. “She is. Or- is. She is. She’s great.”

“She looks great! I see where you get your good looks from,” Rambley blatantly flirted once again. “Oooh, I wish you would’ve been around when I got my Meet & Great! We could’ve been childhood friends! Or, well, whatever you would call the years right after I come out of a test tube.” He tapped his chin thoughtfully.

That alone got Ed thinking. “So, you weren’t in this body then.”

“Nope!”

“Then where were you?”

“I was probably part of the main system still. Anytime you heard a Rambley voice greeting a guest, that was me! Unless it was automated, but those voice lines were so outdated. They had none of the charm!” Rambley explained. He turned to face the screen to look at the picture but still had an optimistic smile. “I was a lot different back then. Things didn’t feel the same they do now. Well, no. They didn’t FEEL period. It’s sort of hard to explain. Like when you’re on a computer and you’re clicking around? You can’t feel the clicking inside of the screen. Well, that’s what it was like being in it!”

That was heavier than Ed was expecting. He got it, he knew Rambley was half in the system at any given time, but it was hard to process that he was a living cartoon character with the brain power and heart of a human, AND just happened to also be some sort of computer programming. At this point, Ed would be barely surprised if anything else got added to the list.

“She does look really sweet...”

And despite the fact that Ed tried to steer the conversation away, it returned to his mother.

“Hey, maybe when the park’s back up and running you can bring her by! I’d love to meet her!”

That would be nice. Ed smiled sadly. That would be nice.

It took Ed a few days to get back to full health, but after that first night with Rambley he did feel generally better. It was nice to have someone take care of him. To remind him to take his medicine on time and keep an eye on his health when he was too worn-out to do so. It worked so well, in fact, that he briefly went home the next day before coming back that night. Something Rambley was elated about.

And once Ed was feeling better and it was time to regain their typical schedule, Rambley didn’t feel bad. He felt a little proud that he was able to help as much as he did. So, he let Ed go home without a fuss.

It felt like that sudden bout of sickness had really brought them together. Rambley was even thinking they might've gone from friend to best friend status!

They were closer than ever now and any day now they would start on putting Indigo Park back together. Soon more of the rides would be in working order and he and his new best buddy would be riding them all and having a blast. Rambley couldn't wait!

There was only one problem.

And that was that yesterday Rambley felt a little tired and went to bed early, and he woke up to a nightmare.

The first thing that blindsided him was just how wrong everything felt. It crawled under his skin in a way that he roused in a panic and sat up in his sheet nest and only then felt a weight like sandbags hanging on him. His head throbbed and his limbs were funky. He felt disoriented and it took him a couple of minutes to truly wake up.

Something was wrong, something was terribly wrong.

He swallowed and it was like sand scraping down his throat, and it made him cough which didn't help the soreness at all. He was cold, downright shivering. He quickly huddled into his sheets, but there was this deep clamminess sinking in through his fur- his fur which he now realized was strangely damp. It was sweat, he recognized the smell.

He panicked for a few minutes before it hit him like a truck. All of this was very familiar.

Oh no.

He was sick.

And then he began to panic again.

“No, no, no, no! How- *cough* How could this happen?!” His voice was hoarse, which only made

him freak out more. “I was so careful! I-I was always washing my hands?!”

But he hadn’t been that clean. Not sterile, at least. Ed had been sick for a few days and Rambley had put all his focus to taking care of him in his hour of need. He had his hands all over him- including his hair! His soft, sweaty hair that could’ve picked up so many germs. He got himself sick.

But there was a good reason that Rambley was panicking.

Despite Rambley knowing exactly what this was, he had no idea what it was going to do to him. His body had never faced anything like this. Interactions with guests were very brief while the park was open and since then he hadn’t been around anything to make him sick- save that time he got a stomachache after eating some garbage-adjacent abandoned food.

This was different. This was a full-blown flu, and he didn’t have any idea how he was going to handle it.

At first he decided that denial was the best option. He buried himself back under the sheets and huddled there until he went back to sleep, and he slept for a lot longer than intended.

When he finally did wake up his eyes were still heavy, and his throat was burning worse. He didn't want to move but he was too thirsty to keep laying there, so he finally slid out of bed. He stood on unsteady feet, yanked a blanket along with him and bundled it tightly around his shoulders, and headed into the restroom to drink straight out of the tap because he didn't want to walk all the way to the kitchen.

Eventually he did drag himself into the kitchen and went through the process of heating some rations. He teetered as he wandered back and forth through the steps. He slouched on the counter, head in his blanket-wrapped arms as he waited for the water to heat up. And then after all that he took one bite and his stomach turned instantly.

The sweet taste of his welcomed favorite meal made his stomach twist up. He tried to force himself through a couple of bites before he pushed it away and plopped his head into his hands. What a waste of food. He would have to try to reheat it later but it would never taste as good as right now. It'd get all mushy- the thought made his stomach twist again.

He felt bad. Really bad.

...But maybe he didn't have to!

While Ed had gone home, he hadn't taken all his stuff. For example, his medicine. He had left that here and there was surely enough left to quell this awful feeling.

He shuffled over to the cabinet that he put them in and peeked inside. A line of medicine bottles stared at him, and he dared a triumphant smile as he started pulling them out. Now, which would work best?

Wait. Problem.

Rambley wasn't exactly... certain how much he weighed. These medicines were dosed based off weight, but he didn't weigh as much as the average person due to how short he was. What if he took too much? What if it made his symptoms worse or caused another problem? Maybe he could take half, or a quarter...

He sent a wary look at the children's liquid Motrin bottle. Then he looked away and begrudgingly snatched it up.

"This is humiliating," he grumbled.

He poured a copious amount into a spoon and swallowed it down, and his face instantly scrunched up.

"Ugh! I thought he said this stuff tasted good?"

He sucked it up and sucked more down with a shudder before grabbing a cup, filling it in the

bathroom sink, and returning to his bed to wait for the medicine to kick in.

Except the medicine didn't kick in. Or it didn't feel like it. He started shivering more and was soon so bundled up that he could barely move, feeling suffocated and yet it was the only way to stand himself.

Eventually he fell back asleep and woke up hours later, feeling even more tired than when he went to sleep. He gave a groggy groan and rolled onto his back, his eyes unfocused and his body heavy.

The medicine must've not worked. Or Rambley hadn't taken enough. He could probably go take some more but that would mean getting up and that wasn't about to happen anytime soon. Not even for water.

Maybe he could politely ask Ed to get him some of both whenever he got there. Oh boy, the thought of Ed showing up as his knight and shining armor was...

...actually kind of embarrassing. The idea of asking Ed to take care of him made him feel sort of useless. Especially since Ed was already bringing him food and spending every other day here. Rambley was taking up all his time! Now he was going to ask him to tend to him while he was sick too? When he was probably still recovering? He couldn't do that!

And then an even more devastating thought crept up.

What if... What if Ed started seeing him as a burden? Asking him to help with the park and always begging him to come back, and now needing him to help him when he said he couldn't get sick- "Oh no, Eddie! I can't get sick! Don't you worry about spreading your germs into my bed and I won't worry about washing it!" -Rambley was no doubt becoming more and more work to deal with.

Ed had been very patient with all of this, but nobody could be patient forever.

And... what if he stopped coming back because of it?

It made Rambley feel sick to his stomach. Sicker than he already was because of how bad he felt.

He started to slouch in on himself, panicky and worried but too groggy to keep himself alert.

“What’s wrong with me?” Rambley said worriedly. He patted his cheeks trying to wake himself up, but only succeeded in realizing how hot his face was through his fur. “Oh, right. That.”

Was this how Ed felt when he was sick? If it was then oh wow. Now he understood why he wanted to sleep so much. Being awake was horrible.

In fact, he rolled over onto his belly, buried his face into the pillow, and forced himself right back to sleep. Not wanting to think about this or feel this anymore.

Some time passed and then...

Someone was at the entrance.

That roused him right away. He tried to check the cameras, and then he tried again when it failed.

He covered his face with his hands. “Focus, focus, focus...”

Finally, he was able to connect onto the system. It connected him to the camera on the front gate, where he had been last connected, and through that he saw what must’ve alerted him.

It was Ed! He had made it! He- Wow, Rambley must’ve slept for a long time. But that wasn’t a problem now. The problem now was that Ed was here and he had to think fast.

...Maybe it was best to keep his distance. Both for his own sake and for Ed’s, so he didn’t get sick again!... And so he didn’t have to deal with another problem that Rambley caused.

As much as it hurt to even think about it, it was better that Ed didn't see him like this. Even if it meant that they would have to miss their visit. Ed could probably use a real night off.

Even though he really didn't want to be alone.

Rambley shook his head, then teetered when the room swayed, and forced himself out of bed.

He quickly tugged on his motion capture suit before crawling back into bed again. He could do all his work from here, he figured. Sat up with the blankets bundled around him, he started to put on a show.

...

Ed didn't suspect a thing as he walked up to the front gate. He was met by Rambley on the screen and smiled, blissfully unaware of what was coming.

"Hey, Buddy! Welcome back!" Rambley greeted.

Something was a little off with his voice, sounding more crackly than usual, but Ed assumed it was the screen acting weird.

“My apologies but I seem to be experiencing some technical difficulties, so we’re going to have to have a raincheck for the fun tonight. Sorry to make you come all the way down here for such a short visit, but always glad to see ya!”

Wait, what?

“What?”

“Well, it’s a long story but something is not working properly and I’m going to have to put all my energy into fixing it. So, I don’t have any time to spare for fun. But we can try tomorrow!... Or wait, no.

Tomorrow’s your work day. Well then, lemme pencil you in for the day after that. How’s that sound?”

So, yesterday Rambley was trying to shmooze him out of five more minutes of visiting and today he was

just telling him to leave? And not just for a few hours, two days?

Ed spotted the red flag waving in his face. Something was wrong, this wasn't Rambley.

His voice was definitely crunchier than usual, and the screen was flicking more than it ever had. Now Ed was starting to find it suspicious. What kind of 'technical difficulties' were Rambley talking about?

"Rambley, are you okay?" Ed asked.

"Why?" Rambley went alert instantly. After a moment he covered it with a smile. "Oh, you mean because of the technical difficulties! Naw, those are nothing."

"Are you sure? Because I could help. You'd just have to tell me what to do."

"I wouldn't dream of asking you to help me. You're my guest! It's my job to keep this place- Oh."

Rambley only then realized the mistake he walked himself into. "Erm, umm, I mean- I mean, I really

need your help getting the park back in business! No doubt about that, I need all the help I can get on that. But this- uh- this is sort of like an... internal problem. I'm the only one who can reach it. But I appreciate the offer!"

Ed was still trying to decode what Rambley was trying to cover with that 'internal' comment.

"Are you sure?" Ed asked.

"Sure, I'm sure! Don't you worry about me, Eddie. Rambley the Raccoon is tougher than he looks!"

That was a strangely concerning answer.

"Oookay but... What kind of difficulties are we talking about here?"

"... Good question! To tell you the truth, I don't even really know myself. I've got to do a fully diagnostic report ASAP!"

And that wasn't an answer.

But now Ed figured out what was so screwy about the situation.

The way Rambley was talking right now was very similar to when he ended up catching Rambley in the office. This weird sort of storytelling excuse train chugging along trying to stall Ed while he tried to weasel a backdoor open. That was the impression this conversation was giving him. Rambley was trying to scamper out the back.

“Okay, uh... Well, if you really want me to leave then I’ll go-.”

Rambley’s ears lowered sadly at that.

“But I brought you some stuff. Can I swing by and drop it off at least?”

“Oh, uh... You didn’t have to do that! But, uh...” The little sweat drops appearing on Rambley’s sprite gave it away. “B-But I still want it! Why don’t you... Why don’t you leave it by the front gate and I’ll grab

it later? I'm going to have to swing by the generator to make sure it's in tip-top shape, so I'll be passing right by!"

That was a long, anxious 'no' if Ed had ever heard one.

"Then I'll just leave it over by the generator.

"Thanks, Buddy! And, umm... And I'm sorry. I'll figure this out. Don't you worry..."

Rambley couldn't even look him in the eye as he said that, but Ed didn't press.

"That's okay. I'll be back before you know it."

He knew something was going on, but Rambley was clearly not going to let him in. So, he headed into the generator room and came back, pretending to but not leaving anything there, and looked to the screen to see it blackened out.

With a sigh, Ed turned and walked out of the park and back towards his car.

...

And then promptly hopped a different section of fence and walked right back inside.

With how in disrepair the park was, Ed knew there had to be a way in other than the main entrance. Low and behold, he managed to find a way in by jumping a fence and climbing a wall. He hoisted himself over relatively easily, just barely avoiding slicing open his palm in the process and hopped down into the park. Then he began his way towards the tree house.

Ed was fully expecting to be caught. Every time he walked past a camera or a screen, he expected to hear a shout or see Rambley's face pop up alongside him, but it never happened.

The fact that Ed made it to Rambley's house without hearing a peep out of the raccoon made him a little

nervous. The fact that Rambley didn't greet him at the gate when he walked up made him downright uneasy.

The door was, unfortunately, locked tight, and he had the hunch to not knock and give his position away just yet. He looked in the windows but couldn't see Rambley, so he was either behind his sheets or not here.

So, he would have to find another way in. Long story short, he ended up finding a tight vent leading into the crawlspace basement around the back of the tree house that he managed to unscrew with pocketknife. He then nearly dislocated his shoulder to climb through, but just barely squeezed in. He clicked on his flashlight and found his way to the hatch.

In the moment of truth, Ed pushed up on the hatch. To his relief it pushed open easily, meaning he wouldn't have to squeeze out the back. He quietly let himself up into the house.

The house was eerily quiet. Rambley was nowhere to be seen, so Ed headed to the curtained corner and peeked through a crack between the hung sheets. He spotted a bundle in the bed.

Rambley was sleeping? Ed pushed past the sheet and immediately noticed a splash of bright green on the ground. It was Rambley's mo-cap suit.

That was weird; Rambley usually had it folded or hung up, not discarded on the floor. As chaotic the bedroom nest looked, it was cluttered but not messy. Things were stacked neatly and used to form the protective layers of curtains to give a cramped and cozy feel. Stuff wasn't just tossed on the ground, especially not something this important. His mo-cap cap was laying on the foot of the bed about to fall off too.

Rambley was bundled up in a little lump in his bed. He seemed to be asleep, but then he shuddered and coughed, lifting his head a little to do so.

Ed took this as him being awake and quietly spoke up.

“Are you sick?”

Probably not a great idea.

“EEEEP!” Rambley struggled under the sheets before shooting up in bed. “Eddie! You’re not supposed to be- Ugh.” He immediately crumpled, pinching the bridge of his nose trying to withstand the pounding rush in his head. “You’re supposed to be heading home...” he muttered.

“I am, I just decided to take the long way.”

Rambley gave him a little frown. Ed returned a guilty smile.

“Sorry about that. I didn’t mean to scare you,” Ed sincerely apologized. “...So, when you said internal you really meant it.”

So, the jig was entirely up. Rambley sighed.

“Okay, Eddie. You got me. I’m sick,” he mumbled. He fiddled with the blanket sheepishly. “But don’t you worry! I can take care of myself, thank you.” He put his hands on his hips and grinned.

“Sure you can,” Ed said with a little smile.

“I really mean it!” Rambley argued, before breaking into a small coughing fit.

“No, I mean it. I wasn’t being sarcastic,” Ed quickly corrected. “You could’ve just told me you weren’t up to a visit.”

“Would you have left?” Rambley asked doubtfully.

Ed’s long pause of an answer actually made Rambley feel a little more warm and fuzzy than annoyed.

“...Okay, probably not. I would’ve wanted to check up on you first,” Ed admitted.

Rambley's smile returned. "D'aww, you're a true friend, Eddie... Hey wait! How'd you get in the park? I didn't open the gates."

"I... can't tell you that."

Rambley got that unamused look again and again Ed got a guilty smile. It worked another smile out of Rambley.

One that was wiped away when Ed pulled over his office chair and sat down.

"Wait, you're staying?"

"Sure. You look like you could use some company."

"But you could get sick all over again! You just got better..."

"I'll be fine," Ed quickly brushed off. "How about you? How're you feeling."

“Good if I lie a little,” Rambley joked. His smile held for a few seconds before dropping from fatigue. His head dropping into his hand. “Ugh, I feel bad, Eddie. I feel all heavy and hot, but so, so cold. My throat feels like blah, my voice sounds like a dying mic, and anytime I move too fast the whole world catches up and starts spinning around. It’s like the most unfun tilt-a-whirl I’ve ever been on and I’m riding it upside-down.”

As comically vivid as that description was, it did make Ed a little concerned.

“Maybe we should take your temperature,” he offered.

Rambley pulled the blankets tighter to his chest.

“Uh... No, you don’t have to. I can tell from the symptoms that I’m running a fever.”

Ed noticed the motion and the dodginess in his tone.

“What’s wrong?” What else was he hiding?

“Nothing! Oh, well, I’m sick. That’s what’s wrong. But I’ll be better by tomorrow, just you wait and see!”
Rambley said. He patted his hands together. “And in the meantime maybe... maybe you should... go.”

Ed’s brows shot up. Rambley instantly panicked at that reaction.

“Take the night off! I meant go and take the night off since I’m in no condition to be a good host.”

“You don’t have to be a host, you’re sick. Least I can do is stick around and keep you company for a while.”

“That’s a really tempting offer but I don’t- well, I don’t think- I don’t really need to be- you know what I mean. I’m not a- I’m not that sick.”

The strain in Rambley’s voice grew as he desperately grasped for more straws. It felt counterproductive fighting for Ed to leave to keep him around longer, but he stuck to his guns. He

could do this. He sucked it up for the act on the screen and the current conversation, he could do this on his own. He wouldn't be a burden; he wouldn't be a pest.

All the while he was not succeeding in running Ed off but succeeding in making him more confused and worried.

It was clear that Rambley was trying to get rid of him and he didn't understand why. Was it because he wanted to be alone? Fair, but he wasn't getting that impression. Maybe he was sick and just wanted his space? Maybe, but that didn't sound like Rambley. Then again, he hadn't exactly been around sick Rambley. It could've been that.

It could've been anything, but he wasn't going to know what it was unless Rambley actually told him.

Ed sighed deeply.

“Okay, Buddy. Why do you want me to leave?”

Rambley's ears tilted back guiltily.

"I don't want you to leave, I just..." he murmured lowly.

He looked so tired. Ed could hear it in his voice, but he could also see it in how lethargic his motions were. How both glassy and unfocused his downcast eyes were.

Rambley took a deep breath, which triggered a couple of coughs. Then he smoothed down the blankets with a little shiver and folded his hands neatly on them.

"Ed, you're the best Rangler I've ever had, and I know you want to help because that's what you're good at, helping people. But I don't... I don't want you to have to take care of me. After asking such a big favor of you to keep coming back here and to help me with the park... I don't want to take advantage of you just because you're all I've got."

So, that was it. That was... very sad to hear.

It also had the exact opposite effect on Ed. Like with asking him to leave doubled down his intent to stay, this just made him more determined to step in. Rambley couldn't really be expecting to nurse himself through this when he hadn't ever been sick before and was feeling awful.

"You're not taking advantage of me by letting me help. Think of it this way: I'm just paying you back for taking care of me," Ed offered. Rambley looked up with his sorrowful eyes. "If you'd really feel better with me leaving then I'll go, but I don't have to. Personally, I want to stick around. Even if I'm just sitting out on the couch."

Rambley let that process for a few seconds. A smile crept up, but he quickly subdued it, only for it to creep back into a full grin. His eyes still unsure.

"...Okay," he said quietly. His voice low and filled with embarrassment. "Okay, but only because you said it was okay."

“Cool,” Ed said. A relieved smile of his own returning. “You need anything?”

“ ... ”

Rambley contemplated it for a long pause before stretching over the side of the bed and grabbing his cup, then turning and handing it to Ed.

“Water, please?” he asked sheepishly.

His fur fluffed and his eyes glazed, with that little uncertain smile. Who could’ve turned him down?

“Sure thing, Bud.”

He filled up his cup with some water from the kettle in the kitchen. It wasn’t exactly cold but it was clean so it would have to do. He came back and sat on the end of the bed, Rambley eagerly grabbing up the cup and almost throwing it back before Ed stopped him.

“Hey wait. Mind if I take your temperature first?”

Rambley perked up almost excitedly.

“Good idea! Go right ahead, Doctor Ed.”

Ed pulled off his pack and quickly scoured through the bottom and was relieved to see that the thermometer was still in there. Forgotten in the bottom underneath a can of boiled peanuts.

“Now just put it under my tongue.” Rambley opened his mouth and stuck out his tongue

“Hold your horses. I need to wash this off first.”

“I appreciate your concern, Rangler, but I don’t think we have to worry about that anymore,” Rambley said, his voice falling off towards the end.

Ed smiled a little. “Good point. Open.”

Rambley winced a little as the cold metal poked under his tongue.

“Is it supposed ta huwt?”

“Might’ve jabbed it under there too hard. Sorry.”

Rambley hummed. After a long minute it beeped, and Ed checked it.

“Ooookay, you are very hot.”

“Thank you. I’ve been watching my figure,” Rambley said dryly.

So, he was a moody sick person. Ed wasn’t sure why, but he found that pretty funny.

Rambley finally sunk into his large pillow. His ears lowered and his cheeks slightly puffed. It turned out that while a weight had been taken off his shoulders, he was still feeling awful.

“I live here for eight years alone and get sick the first week I meet someone,” he mumbled.

“Don’t sweat it. Or do sweat it, whatever breaks the fever faster,” Ed joked. Rambley kept pouting.

“Better it happens now then when the park’s opened up, right?”

That seemed to perk the raccoon up a little.

“That’s right! Thank you, Eddie. That makes me feel a whole lot better. Well, a little. Sort of.” He smiled but sighed. “But it’s still going to put a damper on our fun, me being stuck and bed and all.”

“There’s at least one thing we can do with you in bed,” Ed said.

He started to look around the room, missing Rambley’s eyes going as wide as saucers.

“...Where’s the Connect Four?”

Rambley cracked out a laugh, only to promptly throw himself into a coughing fit and bowing over onto the bed. Just laying there facedown.

Ed looked to him in concern. Rambley simply pointed over in a direction. Ed gave him a sympathetic pat on the head and went off to get the game.

The rest of the evening was pretty lowkey. Rambley obviously wasn't feeling great, but he was happy to have a distraction. Especially happy to get a free pass to play as much Connect Four as he wanted with Ed not complaining one bit. Even though he was losing pretty badly.

But eventually Rambley started to get tired and feel a little rough, so Ed encouraged him to get some sleep. He turned in and Ed stuck around on the couch, browsing on his phone for a while before also going to sleep.

The next morning Ed woke up way earlier than he anticipated with his arm pinned underneath him and asleep. He got up and checked on Rambley and, seeing him still asleep, just stuck around out on the couch on his phone again. The TV running cartoons for background noise.

It wasn't like there was too much else to distract him when Rambley wasn't around, and he wasn't about to go off exploring when his guide was stuck in bed.

The day crept on slowly and around noontime Ed was starting to notice that Rambley was still not stirring. He supposed it made sense that the little guy would be so tired, but it was probably time to give him more medicine. He waited an extra fifteen minutes before deciding to go ahead and wake him up.

He quietly stepped past the sheets to get the cup, noticing that Rambley was still curled up where he had left him. Poor guy was probably beat, he thought. The medicine would take the edge off though.

Ed returned a few minutes later with the refilled water cup and the bottle of Tylenol. He even went out of his way to stir in a spoonful of cherry syrup into the water to spice it up.

“Rambley?” he whispered. He didn’t want to jolt him like yesterday, but he didn’t seem to hear him. Ed stepped a little closer. “Hey, Buddy.”

Still nothing. With a sigh, Ed sat the bottle on the bed and leaned over to gently shake Rambley awake.

He was burning hot to the touch.

And he still hadn’t woken up.

And that was the moment Ed realized something was seriously wrong.

“Rambley?!” Ed said little louder.

He shook him a little, but Rambley still didn’t stir. Now he was starting to panic.

“Rambley, hey! Buddy, wake up!”

Right when he was about to freak out, Rambley groaned and for a second Ed was relieved. But it

was short lived as the second he stopped shaking Rambley he didn't wake up the rest of the way, he just curled back up and faded back off.

Ed set the cup aside on a box and tried waking him again, peeling down the blankets he had clutched in his hands with relative ease. He was burning up, sweating through his fur, and began to shiver instantly.

He was so much sicker than last night. Ed didn't even need the thermometer to tell him that, especially not when Rambley started trying to tug the sheets back. Mumbling something incomprehensible as he did so.

"No, Buddy- we need to get these blankets off, okay? There you go."

Ed managed to get the blankets out of Rambley's grasp relatively easily and tossed them down beside the bed for good measure.

Rambley was still not entirely aware of what was going on, muttering and curling into himself. He reached around blindly before grabbing a hanging sheet and tugging at it. Before Ed could get it out of his hand, something that looked suspiciously like a display rack came falling down with it and Ed barely caught it before it could land on him.

“Whoa,” he exhaled. He got it aside before turning back to Rambley.

Then he reached back for the bottle of Tylenol and just managed to crack it open. How many? What was too much? Rambley wasn't that big- he should've grabbed the children's Motrin. No way he could leave now after the random coatrack incident, but he had to take something.

Forget it, he was giving him an adult dose. It might be a little strong, but Rambley wasn't looking so hot. No, scratch that, he was looking VERY hot and this was the only thing he could think of to get it down.

“Buddy? Hey, I need you to open your eyes for a second. Can you hear me?”

Rambley managed to force his eyes open halfway. They were even glassier than last night and the way he was looking was unfocused, like he wasn't fully aware. His brows furrowed a little in confusion.

“I need you to sit up, okay? Here.”

Ed got an arm around him and helped him up. It wasn't that hard despite the fact that Rambley was almost entirely limp. He was light enough that Ed wondered if two pills were too much.

But he was hot enough that Ed was going to go through with it anyway.

“I'm going to need you to swallow a couple of pills for me. Can you do that?”

Surprisingly, Rambley gave a loose nod. Eyes still sort of dazed and eyelids drooped, but aware enough that he lifted his hand. Ed placed him in his

palm, and he slung them back like a professional, and then started coughing and choking. Ed handed him the cup and he grabbed with both hands and gulped at it. Like he was dying of thirst- he probably was considering how damp his fur was.

He finally stopped to catch his breath and pushed the cup away. Ed leaned over and sat it on the closest box and leaned back in time to have Rambley slump onto him.

This was bad. This was so bad, and Ed had to think fast.

“Eddie?” Rambley asked. His voice crackly and raw.

“I’m here. I’ve got you,” Ed promised.

“Something’s wrong. Feels weird,” Rambley slurred.

“That’s because you’re sick. You’re really, really sick...”

“Oh...”

Rambley didn't seem to understand the gravity of the situation.

"Not as fun's I thought..."

It was enough to break Ed's heart.

He had to do something more. He felt like Rambley was fading on him and he couldn't just stand around letting that happen. He had to cool him down.

"You're going to feel better soon. Here, lay back down. I've got to grab something."

He carefully set Rambley back down and clamored off the bed. He snatched up and untied the sheet from the fallen rack and carried it into the bathroom where he soaked a corner of it. Bundling it up in his arms, he carried the partially wet sheet back to the bed.

Rambley had given up on feeling around for blankets and had pulled his tail around to hug. He had his

face buried into his own fur and was shaking like a leaf, shivering.

That broken heart was really starting to ache now.

But Ed went right to work, getting back beside him and trying to pat him down with the wet sheet. Even wringing it out over him. Rambley scrunched up his face and tried to shield himself.

“Mph, stop.”

“I can’t, Bud. I’m sorry but we’ve got to get you to cool down, okay?”

“M’kay.”

Rambley stopped his feeble efforts after that, and Ed continued to work. Eventually pushing down the puff of his tail so he could dab it on his forehead.

Rambley shirked away at first before changing his mind and pushing back into it. Humming contently at the touch.

Ed was shocked that he could even react to it in this state. Sure enough, when he lifted his head up, Rambley eagerly pressed his cheek into Ed's palm, too out of it to consider what he was doing and draw back.

Ed wanted to find it cute, but he was just too freaked out to think of anything other than him burning up.

And now, because of this ordeal, this wasn't the only thing Ed had to worry about.

It turned out that Rambley was very fluffy. Extremely soft and fluffy. So soft and fluffy that it was hard to see how much of him was... thinner than it was supposed to be.

But of course he was. He was rationing his food. What had he said, he usually ate only once or twice a day?

Had he eaten today? Probably not. That made Ed even more concerned.

“More water?”

“Sure thing.”

Ed reached for the cup and frowned as he realized it was over half empty. He still handed it over.

“I’ll get you some more.”

Rambley mumbled a ‘thank you’ and eagerly swallowed down the last of the water and most of the cherry syrup that sunk to the bottom. Which triggered another round of coughing and panting. Ed gave him a pat on the back and took the cup from him before shuffling down the bed and getting up.

He went to get the water and prepare some of Rambley’s rations. There was an eerie silence over hanging over the house, a sharp contrast to the sunny day outside. Ed looked through the window as he waited for the water to heat, looking at the fractured mess that was Indigo Park.

This was a far cry from the park he remembered from his childhood. How were they supposed to fix this up on their own, automated or not? He supposed... they probably couldn't. But that didn't mean they couldn't try.

He would try for Rambley's sake, and for the slim possibility that maybe they could somehow get some of this stuff back in order. He would be happy with just getting one or two more rides repaired. Preferably ones that weren't at a risk of flying off the tracks.

Yeah, that's what they needed. Him and Rambley survive the killer flu and then die on Finley's Flume two days later. The vivid mental image of Finley opening his mouth and their car gliding straight into it was both morbid and unintentionally hilarious. Rambley probably wouldn't find it so funny.

God, it was weird being here and not having Rambley talking or humming, or just being stuck at his hip. It felt unnatural.

He went to check the water and assumed it heated up enough, so he went ahead and prepped Rambley's rations just as he saw him do. He refilled the cup of water with two spoonfuls of syrup and some cooler water from the bathroom tap.

Rambley was back to huddling up on his bed. Though now instead of hugging his tail he was clutching his pillow, half covering his face with it. Ed decided to let it slide and instead just focused on getting back to him without knocking anything over or dropping anything.

He set the bowl back on the box and tapped on Rambley's shoulder.

Rambley lethargically dragged his head out from under the pillow and dropped it on top of it, looking up at him.

"When'd you get here?"

And there came the panic once again.

“M kidding,” Rambley said with a lazy smile. He coughed into his fist and rubbed at his throat. “Got water?”

“Plenty.” Ed helped him hold the glass. “But go slow.”

Rambley did, only taking a few gulps of the cup before pushing it back. He seemed a little more awake now. At least, he was able to keep his eyes open, but there was still an unfocused quality to them.

This seemed as good a time as any to break out those puffs he liked so much. Ed sat the cup down and grabbed the bowl.

“I got you some food.”

Rambley seemed very disinterested. “M not hungry.”

Ed got it. He knew that feeling this sick probably wasn't working up much of an appetite, but after earlier... had he eaten yesterday? He hadn't eaten today...

“Just a few bites?”

Just like before, Rambley caved quickly. He obediently stomached a few bites of the rations. Ed didn't push him, letting him take his time through every tedious bite.

Rambley didn't get very far before he pushed the bowl away. Ed got the message and set it back down. He could always try again later.

“Thank you.”

“No problem. That's what I'm here for.”

Rambley held out his hand. Ed didn't realize what he wanted at first. He wasn't reaching like he wanted the cup or bowl back, so... Oh.

Ed put two and two together and held his hand. Rambley squeezed back, his grip still tight despite how worn out he was. His little lazy smile returning.

“You’re th’ best Rangler ever,” he mumbled.

Ed had the suspicion that he’d been botching things up since the moment he woke up, so that was really what he needed to hear. He smiled to himself and squeezed back.

Ed stayed with Rambley for a long while. Even after he fell asleep, which wasn’t too long after that, he stuck around to keep an eye out in case anything changed.

He watched some videos on his phone with the volume muted, then low, and every couple or so he would feel Rambley’s forehead and cheek with the back of his free hand. At first there wasn’t too much of a difference but over time he started to feel a little less warm, likely from the medicine kicking in.

A long while later Ed had to finally get up. Both to get a drink for himself and to get something to snack on, haven’t done either since he had gotten up and not wanting to chomp on a bag of chips overtop of Rambley. He felt Rambley’s forehead again and it

felt like he had cooled down a little, so after some consideration he decided to pick up one of the sheets and cover him up.

He didn't go far, heading into the living room to stretch his legs, eat the chips, and make a post that he was going to be off tonight.

He wasn't sure how long it was later, but the chips were gone, and he was on the couch watching videos when he heard movement. He looked over just in time to see the sheet pull back and Rambley shuffle through. The sheet he had been covered with now wrapped around his shoulders.

It took Ed entirely by surprise and he sat up, taking his leg off the armrest- hoping Rambley might've not noticed.

"Oh, hey! Buddy!" he greeted.

"Hey, Eddie," Rambley croaked. He smiled but he still looked tired. His fur was frizzed out and he

seemed a little off-balance, but he was way more cohesive than early which was a huge relief.

“How do you feel?”

“It’s sorta hard to put into words. Best comparison would be... Like I was run over by a train, repeatedly, and my mouth tastes like the bottom of a garbage can.”

Well, that painted a very colorful picture. DID he know what a garbage can tasted like?

“Maybe you should lay back down-.”

“No, no, I’m okay! Don’t you worry, I need to be up and moving. Ugh. Or just, eh, over here.”

Losing most of his energy, he wobbled over and flopped into the couch beside Ed. At the very least he wasn’t radiating heat like he was earlier.

Well, if Rambley felt like being up-

“Want to watch some videos?” Ed offered, holding out his cellphone.

“Sure! Ooo, can we watch more of those dog videos? They’ll make me feel better for sure!”
Rambley perked right up again. His voice strained but filled with eagerness.

Ed really hoped this was a sign that he was on the road to recovery.

Rambley scooted closer and leaned on his shoulder as Ed held out the phone for him to see, already looking up funny dog clips compilations.

Ed knew he wasn’t going home tonight, but he was okay with that. This was where he needed- wanted to be. “Eddie, I’m truly sorry...”

“Sorry for what?”

Rambley got a downright impish smile.

“Sorry for this.”

And then in one swift move dropped the last chip into place and then tapped his finger down the line of four chips he had created. Ed had been paying attention to another line he was making and missed this one- all because of Rambley's poker face.

How someone could be a master at Connect Four was beyond him. Though if it was going to be anyone, it surely would be Rambley. Who was absolutely reveling in his victory.

The two were currently on Rambley's bed playing. Ed sitting cross-legged on the foot while Rambley was with his back to his pillow and his sheet tucked over his lap. He had been doing much better with regular medicine and rest but was still in the middle of his recovery. It was his suggestion that they played in bed, which Ed was more than fine with. The Connect Four stand propped on its box to keep it steady.

"Best out of ten?" Rambley asked cheekily.

“As much as I love getting annihilated, I should probably take off soon,” Ed said with an apologetic smile.

Rambley deflated immediately. “Oh. Right.”

“Don’t worry, I’m coming back. It’s just going to be a little late.”

“...Wait, you mean tonight?! You’re coming back tonight?” Rambley perked right back up.

“Sure do. I just got to go home and get some work done first,” Ed said.

“Then what are you waiting for? The sooner you leave, the sooner you get back, and then we can have a rematch!” Rambley encouraged. He started to push the sheet down. “Lemme just get hooked up really quick and I’ll escort you back to the entrance.”

“Don’t worry about it. I can walk myself out, you just stay in bed and keep cozy,” Ed encouraged.

Rambley crossed his arms with a slight frown. "I'm not that helpless."

"Hey, neither am I!" Ed countered. He shot the raccoon a smile as he got up from the bed. "Need me to get you anything before I go?"

"Nope! I'm all good here. How long are you going to be anyway?"

"Probably about five hours. Maybe a little more getting there and back."

"...Oh." Rambley's disappointment was clear in his voice, but he was quick to cover it up. "Then I guess I'll be seeing you waaay later, Eddie-gator!"

"I'll be back," Ed said with a fake accent in a reference that flew straight over Rambley's head. Then he headed out, again assuring he would be back as he stepped out.

Rambley's ears lowered and he began to put the Connect Four away.

But then, Ed returned.

“You know what? How about you keep my phone and watch some videos until I get back?” Ed suggested.

This was a huge surprise. Ed didn’t go anywhere without his phone from what Rambley say, and the only time he offered it up was for them to watch videos together. Even then he’d only usually hand it over when his arm was getting tired so that Rambley could take a turn holding it. This was way bigger than that.

“Really? You won’t miss it?”

“Not much. I’ve got to work as soon as I get home, so you’re doing me a favor keeping that away from me.”

Ed handed the phone over and Rambley cradled it in his hands like a precious treasure.

“Thank you! I’ll take good care of it,” he promised.

“You know how to look up the videos?”

“Tap the search bar and type! I’m a pretty fast learner when it comes to computers, Eddie. I practically am one! Or was,” Rambley said.

“Good. I’ll see you in a few hours, but don’t wait up for me. If you get tired, sleep. I’ll just crash on the couch, and we’ll hang tomorrow.”

“You got it, Buddy!”

Rambley gave him a thankful smile and wave as he watched him pass the sheets again.

As soon as Ed walked out, Rambley’s cheery smile dropped, and he sunk into his pillow with a frown.

Of course, Ed was coming back tonight like he said. Rambley was appreciative of that and patient enough to wait... but it did remind him that any day now Ed and he would be back to their normal

routine. Rambley had gotten a little spoiled with attention due to this sick spell, so the price of getting better was a return to normal.

He sighed and typed in Ed's passcode- 21345, which Rambley warned him was probably not a complex enough code- and began to go online.

At least he had this, he supposed. It made him feel a little less alone. Maybe getting the park's routers up would be the first step in repairing the park. He was sure he could get internet access once he did, but it required heading to the center of the park, and he wasn't doing that alone.

For tonight he had free access to the internet, so he began to explore.

At first it was the normal fair. Funny dog videos, cat videos, videos where it looked like you were riding on or in a train, some in real-time point of views and others with soft music and ambience in the background. That would be perfect if he wanted to

go downstairs and watch his trains- he would have to try that! It would be so much more immersive!

But before he did that, there was something else he was a little curious about now that he had the phone and Ed wasn't here.

He wondered what he would find if he looked up Indigo Park. Surely, he would find things about the cartoon, and maybe the closure of the park, but maybe he could find more? Maybe there were fans still out there, surely there were!

It both filled Rambley with excitement and trepidation as he typed in the words. He eagerly tapped his fingers together as he waited for the page to load.

Soon enough he was surfing the web. The first time he had done so in years, and there was so much more to see.

It turned out that even though the park was closed, and the cartoons weren't running any longer, there was a ton of Indigo Park stuff online! Information

pages, fanfiction, fanart, fan groups talking about their favorite characters and conspiracies about 'what happened to Indigo Park?' A ton of people were still big fans of him and his friends! And, you know, the others.

There was even some old merch selling on online marketplaces. If Rambley had money to spare! Though he found it weird how cheap everything was. They probably didn't understand the value of it... Though some characters were apparently more in demand than others.

Same thing with the fan works. They were very generous to some characters more than others. A lot of pretty pictures of Mollie, surprisingly fancy pictures of Salem, pictures of them together, uh, kissing and blushing. Heh, he must've missed the memo on those two, he thought with an embarrassed little smile.

But there was a catch to all of this. Something he noticed right away when it came to the resale prices

and only grew more apparent as he saw the arts and the conversation topics on various forums.

Something that put a damper on all of it.

It turns out that people really, really, really, really, really, really liked Lloyd.

Rambley could only grit his teeth in silence and try to ignore the hurt deep in his chest. It seemed like the more he looked, the more he saw about Lloyd and how great he was.

“Indigo Park Anniversary Lloyd plush New condition - \$77.99.”

How cool of a character he was.

“This is a redraw of my first art piece that I posted back in 2015! Lloyd from Indigo Park was always my comfort character and still holds a place in my heart.<3”

How he should've been in more episodes of the cartoon.

"I don't get why they didn't have any Lloyd-centric episodes. The only one that came close was that one where he lost his hat and got depressed and that one where they're trying out for a movie. He was the best character."

How he should've-

"But the Golden Age of Indigo Park came to an end. Not with the closure of the main park, that came later, but with the new frontrunner's attempts to rebrand the franchise for a younger audience. One of the biggest changes being the shelving of Lloyd the Lion as the headlining mascot for Rambley the Raccoon. This ended up being a huge error because while Lloyd was a family favorite character with lots of energy and a spectacular magician theming, Rambley the Raccoon was bland. They even replaced Lloyd's beloved limousine ride with a train ride for Rambley which was much worse."

How he should've... stayed the main mascot of Indigo Park.

That one got Rambley tearing up with frustrated tears. He wiped them away and clicked off after that, returning to the video watching site.

What did they know anyways? They didn't know him. They didn't know Lloyd. They didn't know who was the better mascot.

So, what if Indigo Park closed? They could say it was because he was the mascot all they wanted. They could blame a rebranding or whatever, but that wasn't true! That wasn't true at all and he knew it.

He knew it wasn't his fault. It wasn't his fault the park closed, it wasn't his fault that he didn't get that much fanart, or that his merchandise wasn't as oh-so valuable as Lloyd's. It wasn't him. He knew that.

So, why did it feel like it was?

He watched a few funny videos, but he wasn't feeling it. He couldn't stop thinking about it. About the park, about himself.

Almost compulsively he looked up Indigo Park videos. There was a slew of them, most of them speculating on why the park closed, a few on the characters or reviewing the cartoons, but many of them were older. He looked for anything recent. He was looking for something new.

He was looking for something to tell him that he was better than Lloyd.

Instead, he found a video from only about a week ago. One posted by someone called 'Ensign Shake Clips'. A video with a very bizarre title.

"Ensign broke into Indigo Park and threw up on a child (Smash the Skunk)."

That was, perhaps, the most bizarre title for a video that he had ever read. It sounded downright disgusting, and wrong; Indigo Park hadn't even been

open in eight years! This had to be a lie. A fake video.

...But he was sort of intrigued.

With a look of suspicion on his face, Rambley clicked on the video.

What followed was the last thing he expected.

It was someone playing a game. The game looked to be some sort of shooting scary game- something Rambley wouldn't be a fan of- and over the bangs of the gun there was commentary. Someone telling a story.

“So, when I was a kid, I went to Indigo Park. And they used to have those long souvenir cups with the plastic heads on the top. You buy one for like twenty bucks and get unlimited refills. So, when you're a kid you do dumb stuff and don't think twice. My dumb idea was to chug down three of those and eat a chalupa and get on the Rooftop Races ride. That's one of those rides where the planes stick out and spin

around and go up and down. I get on that thing and I think, 'huh, you know I don't really feel good'. And then I threw up, and I know for a fact it landed on the kid behind me. I probably ruined that kid's whole day. I sure as hell ruined his shirt."

Rambley was dumbstruck. Not by the story but by the voice.

It was Ed.

"Yeah, it closed about eight years ago," Ed said, seemingly replying to the chat box on the right side of the screen. "If you want my guess why the place closed... illegal gambling. Don't ask, I've got a hunch."

Wait, was this what Ed had been going home to do? He played video games online and talked about stuff, and people watched him do it? That was his job?

...

THAT WAS SO COOL!

If Rambley's eyes could've sparkled like his screen self's then they would've been, because wow, that was the coolest thing he ever heard! It was like what he did, except whereas he entertained guests and monitored the pulse of the park, Ed was playing games and talking to people. He was an entertainer! Why didn't Ed tell him about this?!

Rambley was beaming as he continued listening.

"I actually went back to Indigo Park a while ago. I tried to sneak in and get some pictures of the rides and loot a little, but they've got the place locked up tight. And full of snakes. The security guard who caught me said, I kid you not, "You take a step in Indigo Park, and you've got a 50/50 chance of stepping on one or more snakes." Like, have you ever seen that show where people have the infested houses and there was that guy with the pit of snakes in his basement? Yeah, that's what Indigo Park looks like right about now. Not that I saw it, but I trust him.

I don't think someone would lie about that many snakes."

...Hold on, did Ed just say the park was full of snakes?

Rambley mouth dropped open. Ed just told his entire audience that Indigo Park was filled with deadly snakes! Which was surely not the case, or he would've been eating them.

Why would he say that?! All that was going to do was scare people away from Indigo Park!

...

Wait... Unless... that was the point? Ed was trying to protect people by keeping them away from the park. That made sense. In fact, that was a downright noble cause! Ed was putting the park first and keeping them away until it was nice and safe, protecting the public.

...Or he was protecting Rambley.

A fluttery warmth spread across Rambley's chest. Eddie could've been protecting him! Or keeping him for himself, but that was pretty flattering too.

He really did care about him. He really did.

"Chat, please stop spamming 'Smash the Skunk' in the chat."

Rambley's eyes went wide.

No less than a minute later someone posted "Lay with the Lion" in the chat. Rambley's face went beat red under his fur and Ed, who must've seen the comment, cracked up.

"We're gonna Roll with the Raccoon," Ed played along. "And Finley. We're gonna F- No. Okay, he's a like a dragon sea snake. So, we're gonna S- you know what? I think I'm going to just leave it there. Let you fill in the blanks yourself." There was a beat of a pause. "Hey, you're the ones telling me to Slam

the Skunk -Hold that thought, we're at another one of these."

He arrived at some sort of puzzle in a mechanical box, in the game, and the clip ended shortly afterwards.

The clip took a very bizarre tone in the last two minutes, Rambley had to admit, but, uh, that aside it was really good! It wasn't even just listening to the Indigo Park bit, listening to Ed like this was so interesting. It was like he put on a persona. This 'Ensign' character. That was really neat! Kinda like what Rambley did, except Rambley really was Rambley the Raccoon, he really was.

It was a shame the clip was already over... Wait!

Rambley checked for other clips and hit the jackpot. Sure enough there were dozens of them. None of the others seemed to be about Indigo Park, but that didn't stop Rambley from excitedly clicking on the first one he could.

He stretched out on his belly on the bed, legs kicked up behind him as he held the phone and watched it with an eager grin. Ready to see what Ed would say or play next. Doing all he could to focus on the videos and on nothing else.

Indigo Park could wait. It wasn't going anywhere.

...

Ed arrived back at Indigo Park close to midnight. He was under the impression that Rambley would either be asleep or at least wouldn't be hooked up, but as he walked through the open front gate and approached the first turnstiles, Rambley appeared on a screen above him.

"Hey, Eddie!" Rambley had a little grin.

Unless Ed was imagining it, the raccoon was looking a little smug.

"Hey, Bud. I told you you didn't have to stay up."

“Dontcha know? Raccoons are naturally nocturnal!”

Considering the number of times Rambley just passed out the second Ed did, he wasn't so sure about this.

“Come on in! I can't wait to hear that voice in person!”

That was... oddly specific. Maybe Rambley got lonely. Maybe the fever was kicking back in, Ed would probably tell once he saw him in person. So, he headed into the park.

It didn't take him too long to make it to the treehouse. Much to his surprise, Rambley met him at the door. Opening it up as he approached the gate.

“Welcome home!”

That was definitely a smirk that he was pretending was a smile.

“Glad to be here,” Ed replied. He pulled off his bag and reached into it. “I brought you something.”

That cheeky little look on Rambley’s face swapped quickly to a curious one. “Oh? Whatcha bring?”

He nearly gasped when Ed brought out the can of boiled peanuts.

“You brought more peanuts! Thank you, thank you! I’ll get these on the hot plate lickety-split,” Rambley said. He eagerly took the can and raced into the kitchen, leaving Ed to close the door.

Ed made sure it was good and secure and looked out the front windows to make sure nothing had followed him, then went to sit on the couch. He was feeling uneasy, rubbing his hands on his jeans as he kept looking back to the windows. He didn’t even notice Rambley coming back.

“Something wrong?”

Ed flinched and turned to see Rambley standing behind the couch with his arms folded on it.

“You’re awfully quiet. If you’re tired you can get some shut eye,” Rambley offered kindly.

“No, I’m fine. I was just thinking... I’m just slowing down. Want to play a game real quick to wake me up?”

Rambley got that smile that knew too much again.

“I would love to play with you again, Eddie. But are you sure?”

Ed was going to ask what he meant but didn’t get a chance.

“Are you sure you want another-.” Rambley got a sly, toothy grin and narrowed his eyes knowingly. “Roll with the Raccoon?”

It took Ed about five seconds before he remembered where he had heard that line before. Had Rambley

seen- of course he had seen it. There's no way he hadn't seen it. The better question was how he had found it.

"How did you...?"

"I have my ways," Rambley replied. He turned his head and peeked at Ed through the corner of his eye. His tail swishing behind him, betraying his excitement.

"Uh..." Ed got an awkward smile. "You know I was just fooling around."

"Oh, I know that!" Rambley made a brushing motion with his hand before folding them back together. "But I'm awfully flattered and very humbled that you would add me to the mix. Goodness knows nobody else would..." he finished in a flat mumble.

Seeing Ed watching attentively, Rambley smiled again and propped his cheek in his hand. "Sooo, when did you become some big shot celebrity?"

“I don’t know if I’d call myself that, but uh... maybe about five years ago? I started out doing it for fun and the next thing I know it starts paying my bills.”

“And that’s what you meant about going home to work,” Rambley half-asked.

“That’s it. I just, you know...”

Didn’t think it was a big deal. Didn’t think it was worth bringing up. Wasn’t one of those things people thought was much of a career, at least not the ones he had to face in-person. But Rambley...

“What did you think?”

“What did I think? I thought you were great! I couldn’t pull myself away! It was a good thing the clips weren’t too long,” Rambley gushed. He sounded genuine, clasping his hands together like he would do on the screen. “When you said you had to go home for work, I had no idea you did something like that! You’re so cool!”

Ed was flattered, maybe a little embarrassed, but overall relieved.

“Thanks. I try.”

“You try and do!” Rambley chirped. His cheery expression fell back into that playful smile. “By the way, I also heard the snake thing.”

Of course he did.

“About that, I was just trying to keep people out,” Ed explained.

“I figured as much.”

“The last thing we need is someone coming around bothering you. If they saw you and I wasn’t here... I know you can handle yourself, but I don’t want you getting stuck in that position.”

So, it WAS for him. He was positively beaming at that.

“Well, I appreciate the thought.” He really, really did.

Ed looked over at the window for a second.

“Hey, Rambley?” He turned back and noticed the smile he still had. It made him second-guess himself immediately.

“Yes?”

“There’s... There’s this thing I was wondering about...”

“What’s that?” Rambley asked.

Ed hesitated. He almost seemed a little nervous. This made Rambley worried, and he became much more serious.

“What’s going on Eddie? I can tell by your facial tracking that something is bothering you. What happened? Is it because I watched your videos...? I guess that was sort of an invasion of privacy...”

“No, it wasn’t that! I’m glad you did. I didn’t know how to explain what I do,” Ed quickly assured.

“...Facial tracking?”

“Facially tracked by my eyes.”

Cute.

“It’s just this thing. I don’t know if you want to...”

Ed held onto that pause for a long few seconds before abruptly changing his mind. Forget it, not tonight. Rambley’s happy, Rambley loves his job, there’s peanuts on the hot plate, not tonight.

“You know what? Forget about it. I was just worrying about something, but I just want to hang out and worry some other time.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. I had a long night; I just want to chill.”

“Well, okay. But remember that if there’s anything you need to ask me, I’m always listening,” Rambley said. He got a more sheepish look, patting his hands together. “But, uh, I AM sorry I overstepped that boundary... but I’m sort of glad I did. I saw a completely different side of you!” His expression grew a little softer. “And thank you. For looking out for me.”

“No problem.”

“But.”

“But?”

That smile crept back up.

“But I’m not going to go easy on you.”

Ed snapped his fingers.

“Drat. Foiled again!”

This got a little snicker out of Rambley before he went off. Leaving Ed to sit there, smiling to himself until he wasn't, and looking out the window expecting something to look back.

"Also!" Ed turned back to see Rambley returning with his phone carefully cradled in his hands. "I think this belongs to you."

Ed thanked him and took the phone back. "Did it help?"

"It was very helpful! It even gave me some ideas on what repairs we could tackle first in the park! We should really get the wi-fi up for starters. It shouldn't be that hard, but-."

Rambley continued to explain while Ed clicked on the internet explorer tab to see. His brows shot up.

"Oh hey, you found the raccoon videos," he interrupted.

A look of abject horror crossed Rambley's face.

“W-Wait, I thought I exited out of that! That was just- uh- just a little side research is all,” the Raccoon said with a painful grin. “Just hand it back for two seconds, if you could, and I’ll take that right off.”

“Not yet. I want to see what this little guy’s going to do,” Ed said.

“But, uh, I thought we were going to play?” Rambley asked sheepishly.

“You know, I’m seeing a lot of baby raccoons in the recommendeds.”

“Alright, that’s it.”

Ed just barely got the phone over his head before Rambley was reaching over him trying to grab it. Which kicked off a grabby tug-of-war match punctuated by Rambley’s downright frantic-

“If you would just- we’re going to break- give it! Here!- Ugh, Eddie!”

Having a- still recovering- raccoon trying to steal his phone was not on the agenda tonight but all things considered, it was entirely expected.

After all, this was the only game Ed actually had a chance of winning.

.

..

...

It was about thirty minutes before Ed returned to Indigo Park, before he knew about Rambley's discovery and after he finished his most recent stream. He was getting everything squared up in preparation to leave when he went on Harmony to message Laura.

He noticed as he clicked on that she had sent him a link. That was weird, but the message with it was a little less so.

“Me: can we see Rambley the raccoon?

Mom: we’ve got Rambley the raccoon at home.

Rambly the raccoon at home.”

Well, okay. It was still weird but more in a goofy way. He clicked on that link fully prepared to see the ugliest knock-off Rambley merch known to man. Or something equally cheap.

He clicked on the link, and it led to a forum about lost media from Indigo Park. He had swung by this forum before, but he hadn’t ever seen this thread, or the video that the link had led him right to.

The video in question was labelled simply, ‘Unlisted/Lost Media “Indigo Park- introducing the new mascots!’”

He clicked play. There wasn’t a proper dating on the video, but it looked like it could’ve been shot a while back. Maybe back in the 90s, it had that sort of feel to it. It started off as a commercial.

“Hey, Kids! Where are you going this weekend?”

“Indigo Park!”

The commercial show kids running around and walking with their parents in the main square of Indigo Park, around the fountain. Cutting to various clips of them eating, going into attractions, and sudden shots of coasters and attractions.

“At Indigo Park, critters of all kinds can have the time of their lives! Fly high in Jetstream Junction-!”

It cut to a shot of Jetstream Junction, showing off rooftop racers and cutting quickly to the inside of the Landing Pad, with kids playing around in one of the ball pits.

“Dive deep in Oceanic Odyssey-!”

Next was a scene of a little girl walking hand in hand with her mother while dragging her hand on the glass of an aquarium, looking up in awe.

“Or become a star at Lloyd’s Main Stage Theater!
There’s fun and games as far as the eye can see!”

Then was slow motion scene of a group of kids running into the theater while a man dresses as a ticket taker gestured his arms in with a big grin.

Then it cut to a familiar tree house, and Ed was suddenly on the edge of his seat. Watching as a worker, a Rangler, was waving for someone to come out with a big smile.

“Come on down and meet Rambley the Raccoon!”

For a split-second Ed’s heartrate quickened with excitement. Was this actually Rambley? Was this a video of his Rambley’s debut? If that was it, that was inc-!

And then he saw Rambley.

His heart might’ve stopped.

What had been led out in front of the audience was not Rambley the Raccoon. Or it wasn't his Rambley. It was something else. Something much more unsettling.

It was too tall, too thin. It looked like someone in a suit with how lanky it was. Like the skin hung on it. Its head partially tilted as it shuffled out of the doorway and stood at full height.

One arm sticking up in a stiff imitation of a wave, its fingers long and straight. They didn't look right. Nothing did.

Its tail dangled down by one of its partially bent legs. Loose and limp. Alongside its other arm, dangling at its side. Like a scarecrow. Like a costume stretched over a wooden frame. Moving in a stilted way that was somewhere between animalistic and... unreal.

But what was worse was its face.

Rambley's face looked very close to his cartoon counterpart. Not exact, of course, because he wasn't

a living cartoon. Fluffy and soft with those big doll-like eyes. It was something more akin to a living toy than a cartoon or an animal, but it was very approachable. Adorable.

This thing didn't look alive.

Its face looked... fake. Like a stretched mask. Mouth pulled open in a smile- a hiss, a scowl maybe. Frozen open and baring rows of whiteish yellow teeth. Its eyes were large and glassy, but almost entirely black. With only rings of white just at the edges.

It only lasted a few seconds, but it rendered Ed utterly terrified. He sat there jaw clenched and eyes wide as the rest of the commercial ran through.

“ Only at the most colorful place on earth- Indigo Park! Where every day is an adventure!”

...

What... was... that...?

Ed rewatched that Rambley scene again, and again, and then just paused and stared at it.

That wasn't Rambley.

He said something about another body, right? He did, he must've. Ed vaguely remembered something about Rambley getting a body later. That was why he was different from Mollie. He only mentioned it once, and now Ed understood why.

That was why.

He bookmarked the page and closed out of it. Then turned his attention to Harmony, to Laura's lingering message. He drew a blank on what to type for a long before slowly tapping it out.

"It's okay I didn't plan on sleeping tonight."

He then sat there for a whole minute just thinking about what he saw as she responded. Still processing what that was.

It left Ed full of question. Such as, was that really Rambley's old body?

And more concerningly... was it still in the park? Ed never thought he was going to fall asleep, but he must've, because he woke to sunlight streaming through the window.

He cracked open his eyes and stretched out. Then got out his phone to check the time. Shockingly enough it was already nine-thirty, meaning he hadn't just slept but overslept.

It was only once he was sitting up that he noticed the chair beside the couch. It was one of the ones from the dining room that had been moved over. On it was a bowl of Rambley's Rations and a little note with a smiling Rambley face with dotted eyes drawn on it, and under it the words: "Breakfast for Eddie!" written in big bubble letters.

Good ol' Rambley, always looking out for him.

“Hey, thanks!” Ed called. He popped a few into his mouth as he waited for an answer, but there wasn’t one. “Rambley?” Still nothing.

Normally Ed wouldn’t be that worried, but it wasn’t more than a few days ago when he woke up and Rambley wouldn’t. So, he had a right to take notice.

He didn’t panic yet though. Obviously Rambley was awake since he brought him breakfast. But Ed wanted to go find him, so he grabbed the bowl and started to wander the tree house looking for him. Getting a drink, stopping by the bathroom, and checking behind the sheets only to find that Rambley wasn’t there.

He didn’t get really confused until he opened the hatch and looked down into the basement to see that Rambley wasn’t down there, meaning he wasn’t in the house at all.

Ed finished what was in the bowl and set it down on the chair before pulling on his shoes and heading for the front door. It was unsurprisingly unlocked.

But Ed didn't have to go far to find Rambley. He came outside right as Rambley was coming up to the gate dragging an armful of heavy tools. Rakes, a shovel, and something that looked like a short hoe. Most of them cacked in old dirt and dust. He was wearing a pair of heavy-duty work gloves that likely came from wherever he got the tools from.

"There you are. Morning!" Ed said.

"Hey Buddy!" Rambley replied.

He kicked gate open and lugged the tools inside and dumped them unceremoniously into the grass while Ed just starting to offer to help. He pulled off each glove and tossed them down neatly beside the tools, then spun on his heel and faced Ed attentively.

"I had the perfect idea for where we can start in refurbishing the park!" he said, planting his hands on his hips. "Something small that'll make a BIG change without much work at all! Well, a little work, but nothing too strenuous for our first project."

“Sounds good to me, but are you sure you’re up to it?”

“I’m good to go!” Rambley assured with a thumbs up. Though then his ears slid back. “But, uh, problem.” He tapped his pointer fingers together. “We’re going to need more equipment.”

Ed understood what that meant, but he was already on-board. “Alright, just point me in a direction.”

“Oceanic Odyssey,” Rambley said. He pointed in that general direction with an apologetic smile. Though then spun his finger and pointed it to his own chest. “But I’m going with you.”

Ed’s brows raised. “Uh, are you sure? I could probably handle it.”

“It’ll be much quicker, safer, and easier with two sets of arms. Don’t you worry, Eddie, I can do this! I can be sneaky when I need to be.”

Ed knew that from experience and just smiled.

“Let me just slip into some more comfortable,”
Rambley said.

He hurried into the house again and Ed took a moment to stretch. It was a nice, sunny day out, meaning that the park was looking... Well, it didn't look great, but it didn't look nearly as dismal and spooky as it did last night. This was the sort of place where anyone would want to do a little exploring- but hopefully his fib took care of that.

A few minutes later Rambley returned decked out in his mo-cap suit and carrying Ed's backpack.

“I thought you might need this,” he said, holding it out.

“Thanks. I'm not all awake yet.”

“Buddy, I've been up since the crack of dawn and even I'm not awake yet.”

The pile of tools begged to differ.

Soon the two headed out of the gate and were heading towards Oceanic Odyssey.

It really was nice out. Maybe a little too warm to be comfortably working outside, but Ed was up for it. He'd have to make a mental note to keep an eye on Rambley though. But so far, he seemed to be doing much better. He had the usual pep in his step but had grown a little quiet.

The reason why he had was revealed when he broke that silence.

"You know... I was checking around online last night, and I realized something," Rambley began. Ed looked at him, but Rambley continued looking anywhere else. "I might be the main mascot of Indigo Park, but I'm not exactly the most popular character. If anything, I'd say I'm the least popular character other than Finley, and he's, well... He's a tad on the quiet side. Hard to get him out of his seashell. He could disappear in an empty room as

long as there was a corner big enough for him to squeeze into.”

“I’m sorry,” Ed said. He quickly added, “You could’ve just gotten onto a forum that was talking about other characters since they’re not as popular. Might’ve gave you the wrong impression.”

“No, they were definitely talking about how much they liked them more than me. Well, sometimes. Most of the time they just didn’t talk about me at all. Which I guess makes sense. What’s there to say? I’m Rambley the Raccoon! Everybody already knows my deal...”

He trailed off before sighing and plastering on a smile.

“It’s fine! I don’t even know why I brought it up. It’s not like it bothers me any. It didn’t hurt my feelings... much.”

From how lowly and out of the corner of his mouth Rambley said that Ed had a hunch he wasn’t

intended to hear it. But he did, and now he had to say something.

But when he tried to think of what he could say, he drew a blank. Apologies weren't good enough and assurances weren't certain.

So, he went with his gut and just said whatever fell out first.

"Nobody says the main character is their favorite."

"What?" Rambley looked back quickly.

"I mean it. It doesn't matter how good the main character is, people usually like the side cast. Like the comic relief ones, you know? Or the edgy one. Or the one everyone wants to smash."

As hoped, that got a snicker out of Rambley. "I guess that makes sense."

"There's sort of a stigma against liking the main character of anything. It's an unspoken stigma,

where you're boring if you just like whoever's on the front of the box."

"Are you just saying that because you want to cheer me up?" Rambley asked knowingly.

"No, I'm saying that because you're my favorite," Ed said honestly.

"You're just saying that!" Rambley said with a flustered little laugh. That showed that it didn't matter if he was; Rambley soaked up the compliment like a sponge.

And it worked too! Much to Ed's relief. Rambley seemed to perk back up after that and while he wasn't naïve enough to believe it fixed everything, at least the guy knew he had someone in his corner.

After a short hike through Indigo Park, they arrived at the entranceway into Oceanic Odyssey. It looked much less threatening in the daylight, but it made the dark entranceway look even more shadowy.

So, Oceanic Odyssey was technically a ride. A ride that Ed had encountered firsthand days ago.

However, it was also the name of the attraction surrounding it- an aquarium, a museum, a gift shop, there was even a flume ride somewhere inside. Ed had explored a good chunk of it and, admittedly, wasn't too excited to come back. Finley still gave him the creeps.

“Welcome back to Oceanic Odyssey! Gosh, I haven't been here in ages! Well, not in person at least! It looks just like it-... Oh.” At that moment Rambley finally got close enough to the door to see some of the state of inside. “...So, maybe it doesn't look exactly like it did the last time I was here, but at least it's still standing! Especially after your run-in with Finley.”

“Heh, yeah...”

Ed was really hoping wherever they were going was far from any of the flooded sections. Yet he still followed Rambley in, getting his flashlight out and clicking it on as he did.

It was still mostly dark inside, but once they stepped into the main hall there was light creeping in through some of the windows and broken openings in the ceiling or walls. It was still pretty dark, but the glimpses of light took some of the tenseness out of the place. Emphasis on some.

“This place used to be really something back when the park was open. There were jellyfish that would glow in the dark and a Manta Ray tank where you could pet the babies. Oh, and we had two of the world’s only remaining South-Salt Sea Turtles! Just walking through this place was like walking straight into the ocean,” Rambley said. His hands clasped and his eyes large with wonder as he remembered it. “Did you ever come here when you were little?”

“Once, but it wasn’t my kinda place... Finley always freaked me out.”

“I think I recall you saying something about that,” Rambley said with a slightly teasing tone. “But I

understand. Finley IS pretty big in person, and those eyes- oof. They never really got those right.”

They made it deeper into Oceanic Odyssey. Ed vaguely remembered passing through here before getting led in a different direction and entering a section he hadn't gone through. The shutter blocking the way easily opening with a curt clap from Rambley.

They found themselves in a hallway with a moving floor- though the moving floor was not functioning. Posters of Finley in various poses and a multitude of cartoon and real-life sea animals were plastered and peeling off the wall, and a few screens were mounted on the ceiling.

Rambley side-eyed Ed with a smile before shooting finger guns at the first screen.

In an instant the screen alit with an image of Rambley himself! In cartoon form, now wearing a diving suit. Not that it made it any harder to hear him.

“Welcome to Oceanic Odyssey! This way to the bottom of the ocean and beyond. It’s a big place down there, but don’t worry! Finley knows this place like the back of his tail.”

Rambley clipped himself to the next screen and continued the spiel.

“Did you know the deepest trench in the ocean is thirty-five thousand feet? That’s just about seven miles deep! And there’s so many amazing creatures down there, many that you can only find there- and here at Indigo Park! You’re going to learn all about Finley’s fish friends! I’d tell you all about them, but I don’t speak fish.”

Ed found himself smiling whenever Rambley went off into one of these performances. But this time was very different; this time Rambley was right beside him and getting fully into it.

He stole a glance at Rambley. It was the first time he had really seen Rambley while he was controlling the screen.

His expression matched his cartoon counterpart. His motions matched it to a T. The only difference being something in his eyes. His pupils were swollen, Ed realized after a second longer look. Almost like they were out of focus, or perhaps focusing on something else. Seeing through something else.

He had to figure out how that worked one of these days. There had to be more to it than a brain chip.

Rambley continued the charade through the rest of the screens before stepping through the gaped open electronic doors into a larger room.

This must've been some sort of rest area that branched off to other subareas. There was a hall leading off to the left and the right and a stained-glass dome above that was so dirty that only the faintest glow made it through. The room was

mostly devoted to a large stairwell with escalators leading into the lower section of the attraction.

Except instead of leading to a lower floor, they led directly into water.

The floor beneath them was entirely flooded.

Rambley was froze in place at the sight. Ed was expecting the worst.

“Whoa...”

But that wasn't disappointment in his voice.

Rambley walked over to the top of the stairwell and looked down into the bed of algae and aquatic plants that had grown beneath the water. Little fish could be seen swimming around. Nothing fantastical or colorful, but little dark brown fish likely feeding off the sea grass that had sprouted from the spilled tanks.

“This is incredible...” Rambley murmured. He looked over it in awe. “I... I didn't realize that the fish

would... that the aquariums would keep on thriving like this. All because it flooded.”

“It’s actually pretty cool,” Ed agreed. He looked over the marine life laid out before them. “Bottom floor’s a total loss though.”

“Oh yeah. Put that on a T-shirt,” Rambley agreed.

He didn’t seem disappointed though. In fact, a smile soon spread across his face.

“Now these are the wonders of the ocean! Maybe not contained behind the safety of a glass pane, but still living and surviving in its very own ecosystem! Isn’t it beautiful?!” Rambley gushed.

Strangely enough, it was. Ed always found a sort of charm to forgotten, deteriorated places. That was part of the reason he gotten into urban exploring in the first place.

“Yeah, it is.”

“And fortunately for us, we don’t need to go down there.”

It was looking a whole lot better now.

“Our destination is right this-a-way,” Rambley said. He pointed towards the right hallway with both hands and then started over there.

Ed followed along behind him, and they headed down the hall to a door in it.

Neither of them noticed a long, reddened leg raising out of the water as they went.

“Here we go! Right through this door is what we need!” Rambley said, stopping outside of a door. Beside it was a little mounted sign that read ‘Supply Closet’ with it dotted in braille underneath.

Rambley tried the closet door only to find it locked tight, and not by an electronic lock but a regular old door lock in the handle. He sighed.

“I had a feeling it’d be locked,” he said. Then broke into a grin. “Which is exactly why I came prepared!”

He turned around his sleeve and only then did Ed notice the bobby pins pinned to his suit. He unhooked them both, straightened them out, and then began to pick the lock with them. Keeping his ear close to listen as he focused on the taps on the inside of the lock. It was pretty clear that he had done this before.

But Ed was also hearing a tapping. He lifted his head to listen turning to look back down the hallway. At first, he didn’t see anything.

And then he saw long, sharp legs creeping into view.

And his eyes popped open.

There was a giant spider crawling across the floor—no, not a spider. A crab. A crab that looked like a spider and was way too big to be either, with eight crooked legs at its sides and two long arms in the front that ended with notable claws.

“Rambley?” Ed whispered.

“Yes, Eddie?”

“What in the hell is that?”

Rambley glanced over. “That’s just a crab.” He looked back to the lock.

Suddenly his eyes went wide, and he slowly looked back at the crab.

“That’s just the biggest crab I’ve ever seen!”
Rambley shout whispered.

“That can’t be real. What is it, an animatronic?” Ed whispered.

“No! It’s- Okay, so, uh, hold on.” Rambley frantically tried to pick the lock. “S-So you remember what I said about- you know, how the mascots were grown? They didn’t just grow mascots- or not- see how Finley’s so big?- (Come on, come on!) -Well,

he's uh, he was- he had to be bigger to be seen from both sides of the tank, right? Right. All the sea creatures had to be bigger so they could be seen, so they were given growth enhancement treatments and now heh, the crabs are as big as, uh, me. Almost. Close."

"Get that door open?"

"Almost... got... it...!"

Right when the crab was starting to turn itself almost in their direction, there was a click, and the door was pushed open. Ed all but shoved Rambley through before swinging the door closed- stopping it only an inch before it was closed and slowly, quietly sliding it into place.

Rambley wiped his forehead. "That was a close one. I'm not even sure if those guys are aggressive, but I sure don't want to find out!"

"Why'd you stop fishing here again?" Ed asked uneasily.

“All the little fish that I was skimming from the top dried up,” Rambley said. His eyes went wide as he processed a horrifying realization. “I thought Finley was eating them...”

“I’m shocked that thing didn’t eat Finley,” Ed exaggerated.

Rambley gave a nervous little chuckle. “Let’s just grab the goods and skedaddle before we get cornered in here.”

Rambley spun around and started to scour the shelves with his eyes while tapping his chin. The room was a small, compact storage room with walls of shelves stacked with supplies, so he didn’t have to go far. Eventually his eyes lit up as he spotted a row of dust covered jugs hidden on a bottom shelf.

“Ah ha! Here!” He hoisted up one of the jugs. “Algae remover.”

“What are you planning to do with that?”

“For our project! I’ll tell you all about it once we get out of here. Think you can fit one or two in your bag?”

Ed managed to fit only one into his bag but carried two jugs. Rambley carried one and grabbed a broom-like scrub brush with his free hand.

“Is this for the fountain?” Ed guessed.

“We’ll see! First, we’ve got to get past our hardshell friend out there.”

“It doesn’t look that fast. We could maybe run for it.”

“I’m up for it if you are!” Rambley agreed. He rested the brush on his shoulder and opened the door to peek out-

Only to quickly shut the door and turn back with a horrified look. “We’re not up for it.”

“Let me guess. It’s standing right there.”

“One of them is.”

Ed’s brows shot up. “One what?” Rambley gave a stiff nod. “How many are out there?!”

“A bunch of them. They must’ve followed the leader right up and out of the submerged floor,” Rambley said.

Ed set down a jug to open the door. Rambley made a slicing motion with his hand, desperately signaling for him to not do that, but the man still dared to peek out.

Sure enough, there was a very large crab slowly making its way down the hallway. Its legs so long that they almost touching both walls. Behind it Ed could clearly make out at least three other crabs in the main room, so he assumed there were more. He quickly shut the door back.

“...We might still outrun it,” Ed said.

Rambley's horrified look returned.

"They look big, but their claws are only about this big. If they swing as fast as they move, we can dodge 'em," Ed said, holding out his hands to emphasize.

"Sure, probably. But I'm not worried about their claws. I'm worried about if these are the venomous ones or not."

Ed's expression now matched Rambley's. "They're poisonous?"

"Venomous. Poisonous is when they make you sick when you eat them. Venomous is when they bite and envenomate you. And yes to both," Rambley answered. "...I think."

"You think?"

"I think. I know there was a crab listed in the venomous alert list, but I, heh, I don't know which is which. There weren't any pictures."

Rambley gave a strained, sheepish smile. Ed could only stare as he realized they were very screwed.

“B-But don’t you worry! All the sea life in Oceanic Odyssey is taught through treat-based training to seek out guests. That’s probably why they came out in the first place. So, if we make noise somewhere else, they’ll go off to find the party!” Rambley shot a confident smile with one hand on his hip and a thumb in his chest. “Leave it to me.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Rambley set down what he was carrying out of the way before stretching a little. Then his eyes suddenly lost focus, his head almost lolling before straightening. And then-

“Hey, everybody! It’s time for a Rambley dance hour! All participation and observation of the Rambley dance hour is totally mandatory. Are you ready? Let’s dance! A’ cha cha cha cha! A’ cha cha cha cha!”

And then Rambley began to dance. Shaking his fists, shaking his hips, shimmying in place in a little dance. His tail swishing and a toothy grin on his face. He was dancing like someone who wasn't trying to avoid giant aggressive crabs, that's for certain.

He really knew that he shouldn't. He really, really shouldn't but... Ed slipped his phone out of his pocket and started to record. He could always delete it later if Rambley wanted him to, but it was impossible to pass up.

After a short while of dancing his heart out- and seemingly getting really into it- Rambley stopped. Ed quickly ended the video as Rambley blinked back to normal.

"Did it work?" Ed asked.

"...No," Rambley admitted defeatedly. Ed patted his back, and it was then that he noticed the phone in his hand. "Why do you have your phone out?"

He was caught red handed.

“Uh, well. Good question. But the better question is...” Ed went to the video and tapped it on before showing it to Rambley. “Can I keep this?”

Despite just dancing his heart out willingly in front of Ed, Rambley looked utterly flustered by the video. Blushing underneath his lilac-grey fur.

“For what?” he dared to asked.

“Just to keep on my phone. I won’t send it to anybody.”

Now Rambley was very aware of the danger of having a video of him floating around. Seeing him on a screen was one thing, but this would be irreputable evidence of his existence if it fell into the wrong hands. He trusted Ed, but letting that video leave this park was inviting that risk in.

But Ed liked his dance enough that he wanted to save it on video. Bigger still, Ed wanted pictures of him on his phone. That was all the convincing Rambley needed to cave.

“Okay, but if that ends up on one of your streams, I’ll know who put it there!” Rambley ‘threatened’ with a nervous little titter.

“Don’t worry. I’m not going to do that to you,” Ed reassured. He put his phone away. “So, what’s the plan?”

“That depends, do you get claustrophobic?” Rambley asked.

“Nope.”

“Then follow me!”

Rambley led Ed into the back corner and right to a vent leading into the wall. He moved the box partially blocking it, revealing that it was large enough to crawl through.

“Do you have something we can use to unscrew the cover? A coin would work!” Rambley suggested.

“I’ll do you one better.”

Ed crouched down in front of the vent and pulled out his pocketknife. He began to work at unscrewing the cover.

“Ooo! You came prepared! Excellent job, Rangler!” Rambley said proudly.

Soon Ed had the cover opened and set aside. “Want to go first?” he offered.

“I would but maybe you should. I think you’re better equipped to handle the cover on the other side,” Rambley reminded.

Ed pushed the jugs inside first and started to crawl in. It was only slightly larger than the hatch he had crawled through in the treehouse’s basement, but he was able to make it through. Though unlike in the

basement, it wasn't over in a few seconds. It was a slow push and drag without a clear end in sight.

At one unnerving section the vent dipped down into a flooded room. Water leaked in through the grate and filled the vent in a shallow puddle. Not much, but the knowledge that the vent could've dropped, trapped, and drowned them was somewhere in the back of Ed's head. Though he didn't really think about it until they were already out of the water and moving on.

Rambley mumbled something about the water and shook off his hands so they wouldn't slide on the smooth metal.

After a while longer, Ed finally crawled up onto another vent cover. The vent kept going but it looked like it went straight up, unless the reflection of his light was only giving the illusion. But by then he was getting cramped anyways. He would've risked the toxic crabs to stretch his legs a little.

He pushed at the vent cover before giving it a small hit with his fist to test it. Not especially loose but the slightest bit wobbly. Might cut up his hands if he kept trying like this, so the quickest alternative was to try and kick it out.

“Stay back, okay?” he warned.

“You got it!” Rambley moved further back down the vent.

Ed crawled up a little further, moving the bottles with him, and then turned on his side. He made sure he was aligned before giving the cover a firm kick. It held. A second kick. It started to bend. A third. A corner came loose. A fourth. It wedged further away. A fifth. His leg was starting to cramp a little. Then a sixth which finally knocked the cover free enough that he could shove it off the rest of the way.

“Wow.”

Ed looked down past his legs to see Rambley staring wide-eyed.

He flashed him a smile. "I don't skip leg day."

"I can see that," Rambley said with his own little lopsided grin.

Ed went out of the vent legs first, which turned out to be the most cumbersome way out, but he committed to it and dragged the algae cleaner out with him. Rambley followed behind, easily slipping out and then struggling to get the brush to follow. With one harsh yank it was pulled free, he briefly teetered, and then he joined Ed in looking around.

They were in some little room in between two long halls with wavy walls and round aquarium windows dotting them. Sea grass grew wild over them and water leaked in little streams from the seals underneath a couple of them. Yet fish swam by inside undisturbed.

"Hmm..." Rambley rubbed his chin. His eyes unfocusing and blinking, and then he snapped his

fingers. “I know where we are! And I know which way we have to go to get back out. This way!”

He directed ahead with the brush before resting it on his shoulder and marching along. Ed followed along behind him, looking up at the windows as they passed.

He was glad that they hadn't seen Finley... but also it made him very nervous that they hadn't seen Finley.

They passed under some hanging directing signs that pointed in various directions before Rambley took a sharp left. Then stopped so abruptly that Ed almost walked right into him.

It didn't take him long to see what had stopped him. The hallway led through some sort of elevated windowed tunnel that looked down into what looked to be a museum below. Except the flooring had fallen in leaving a good drop into the lower level, which was entirely flooded.

It was a shame. While Ed didn't like Oceanic Odyssey as a kid, it looked like it had once been a pretty neat place. And Rambley looked just a little devastated.

"Oh no... I guess we should've expected this. There's no way the building could remain fully intact with all the flooding..." Rambley sighed and slouched his shoulders. Then rested his jug toting fist on his hip. "Worse still, this blocks us from getting back to the entrance too. But there's got to be another way around. Hold on just a second, let me think..."

While he tried to think of a way out- and was likely looking elsewhere for one, with how vacantly he started to stare- Ed looked around for himself. There wasn't much to see.

He wandered back to those signs they had walked under and looked up hoping to see an exit sign amongst them, but no. Instead it pointed out nearby attractions, such as the Marine Museum, the Turtle

Tank, the Sunken Treasure Gift Shop... and Finley's Flume.

Finley's Flume. Ed had passed Finley's Flume outside when he left Oceanic Odyssey the last time. He knew the track and ride did exit the building. If it was in working condition it could be their way out.

"I've got an idea," he called.

Rambley instantly snapped out of his trace, shaking his head and looking back.

"You do? That's great! What is it?"

Ed nodded up at the sign and Rambley hustled over at his side to see it.

"This says Finley's Flume is right down that way. Finley's Flume leads outside," Ed explained.

"Yes, it does, but it doesn't stop outside," Rambley said disheartened. He perked back up. "But there

might be an emergency exit near the ride! Excellent thinking, Rangler! Let's go!"

To get to Finley's Flume meant crossing through part of Finley's section. Where the walls were full windows looking into the dark abyss that would've been part of Finley's enclosure.

There was still no sign of Finley, but Ed heard a low groaning from somewhere far beyond the glass panes. Rambley must've heard it too as his ear twitch, but he didn't remark on it. He just quickened his pace.

The entrance to Finley's Flume was cute and surprisingly was standing up better than most of Oceanic Odyssey. Even the Finley cardboard cutout looked pretty decent despite the amount of humidity in the air. There were posters on the floor that had likely detached from the walls and a little entrance booth with a line formed with teal velvet ropes.

It led them straight up to the flume itself. The ride cart was the same as Ed remembered from the other

ride, looking like an oversized seashell. One that was once white and was now off-white and peeling. Other than that it was the typical ride car, with a secure lap bar and barely padded seats.

Rambley began to search around for this exit he imagined would be there with a hopeful look in his eyes. One that waned once he couldn't find it and was fully replaced with worry after he unfocused to check something in the system.

"I don't see any sign of an emergency exit," Rambley said uneasily. "I suppose we could try to walk down the tracks. They would keep up from getting in over our heads... but that could be really dangerous. One wrong slip and we could go under, and with all the algae and sea grass... and Finley..."

"Why don't we try the flume idea?" Ed offered, gesturing a jug at it. "It's worth a shot."

"But it's so dangerous..." Rambley murmured. "Jumping out of a moving cart?"

“But it’s way less dangerous than walking. And hey, think of it like we’re jumping off a train. People used to do that all the time and live.”

It was cute how quickly the train comment caught Rambley’s attention. His worried eyes trained on the floor jumping up to look at Ed, intrigued. He cracked a smile too.

“I don’t think trains from the wild west and amusement park rides run at the same speed, Eddie.”

“Hey, I’ve been on this ride and all I can remember is that it doesn’t move faster than a light jog. As long as we don’t jump while we’re going down the big hill, we’re good to go,” Ed said. “Could be fun.”

Rambley was clearly not as convinced. He looked at the flume car nervously. He didn’t want to jump out of that thing. He didn’t want to get into that thing. No amount of blind optimism would make him forget those sunken and collapsed floors. This ride hadn’t had maintenance in years!

But the alternative involved getting into the water.

...

“Let’s do it.”

“Atta Coon! Let’s go,” Ed encouraged. He walked over to the cart and loaded the jugs inside.

“Wait, stop!” Rambley cried. Ed paused in position.
“Let me just check really quick...”

His eyes unfocused as he checked on the mechanics of the ride. After a few seconds, he got a smile- a very begrudging one.

“Good news! Looks like I can manually activate the ride from the ride! I-Isn’t that just... swell?” He gave a little fist swing. “So, I guess that means: All aboard!”

Ed went back to climbing in as Rambley dragged his feet into coming over and putting his stuff in. Then

slowly, very slowly, climbing onto the cart alongside Ed. He carefully grabbed the safety bar, paused for a long second, and then pulled it back into place. Locking them into the cart.

“Now let’s see...”

Rambley unfocused again. His hands patting on the safety bar as his eyes darted around and looked at things that weren’t there. Then, after a long second...

There was a loud pop and then a low hum rising from somewhere. Now both of their eyes were darting around as the sound of churning water kicked up, and there was a rumbling creaking from somewhere under the cart.

And then, suddenly, a slow and melancholy- and crackly- voice spoke up.

“Please keep your hands and fins inside the seashell at all times. And take a deeeep breath. You will get splashed.”

“Aww! There’s the Finley I remember,” Rambley said. He got a little smile as his eyes returned to focus. “And look at that! The ride’s still working! That’s one more thing that doesn’t need immediate maintenance.”

Rambley was trying his hardest to stay positive, even as his little hands held the safety bar in a death grip.

“Good. I didn’t feel like swimming today. Hey, can you lift this back up?” Ed asked. He tapped the bar.

“The safety bar? I can but... that’s going to be pretty dangerous.” Rambley sighed. “But I suppose we can’t hop out if we’re latched in. Just a second.”

He unfocused again as the cart drifted into the darkness. The constant churn and wash of water surrounding them.

“Administrator access? What do you mean? I am the administrator,” Rambley mumbled to himself.

The cart dipped down a gentle slope and into a wide tunnel. It followed a submerged track in the center with some feet of water between it and the sides of the tunnel and their thin walkways.

Old, soggy Finley cutouts followed alongside them on the walls. There was a funky smell in the air- one of stagnant water and old grimy metal.

The safety bar abruptly released. It almost made Ed jump at the suddenness of it.

“Done! But maybe you should scoot closer. We don’t want to go overboard in here, eesh,” Rambley said.

“Good idea.” Ed slid closer before continuing to keep watch.

Rambley looked down at the little space in between them.

“So, have you ridden on any of these rides? Like, before the park closed?” Ed asked.

“Only a few of ‘em! And only after Indigo Park closed. I got a little crazy for a few days,” Rambley admitted. He tapped his fingers together. “Hey, why don’t you... scoot a little closer? Just a little more.”

He had to be spooked, Ed realized. He slid over the rest of the way and put an arm around his shoulders, trying to assure him. Trying to get a little assurance himself, considering how increasingly creeped out he was by this ride.

But Rambley was a trooper. A smile on his face and his hands twisting up in his lap. His tail swishing around on the back of the seat, tickling Ed’s arm. If Rambley could handle this liminal space nightmare then Ed could.

“So-,” Ed began.

“Welcome to the bottom of the ocean. There’s plenty of sea creatures waiting to meet you,” Finley’s automated voice introduced. “Like my friends the jellyfish. They may sound as sweet as honey, but

they sting like bees. Why don't you say hi? I would, but I'm too shy."

But when they looked through the glass at the enclosure, where there were supposed to be jellyfish, there was just an empty tank. An eerily empty, dark tank.

It was giving Ed Oceanic Odyssey vibes, and not in a good way.

"Huh. I guess the jellyfish must've moved. They might be downstairs," Rambley said.

"Maybe..." Ed said. It didn't make the emptiness any less noticeable. "...Sooo, got crazy how?"

"Oh, right! Well, I thought we were only going to be closed for a few days..." Rambley got a cheeky little grin. "So, I decided to have a little fun. I rode a bunch of rides, I ate a bunch of food, and I took-borrowed! I borrowed the train sets I used for my mini railroad! I was planning on putting them back

when the staff came back, but when nobody showed up... I just kept collecting more!”

That sounded sad. “Sounds fun.”

“It was the best day of my life,” Rambley said fondly. His eyes almost glistening as he looked up at Ed.

Though that joy faded. His eyes down casting and his ears lowering. “...After the worst day of my life.”

“Oh Buddy...”

Rambley reacted to Ed’s sad tone instantly by again slapping on a smile and raising his hands defensively.

“What? No! It’s a good thing! I had a whole lot of fun, and that’s a big part of the reason why we’ve got to get this place running again! Think of all the best days ever we could give people if Indigo Park was still-.”

“And here are the seahorses. Did you know that the Father Seahorse is the one who has babies? Mother Seahorse lays her eggs into Father Seahorse’s belly pouch, and he grows the babies until they are ready to be born. They can have nearly one thousand babies at once.”

“Oh, for crying out loud. Finley,” Rambley mumbled, pinching the bridge of his nose.

Once again, the tank was uncomfortably empty. Staring into it felt like something was staring back.

“The point is,” Rambley said, tenting his fingers together. He looked up at Ed with a warm smile.

“What’s done is done. We can’t change that, but we can fix this. Why, by next year we could be looking at a repaired park ready for reopening! Just imagine this place once it’s cleaned up.”

Rambley gestured an arm out at the tunnel. There really wasn’t much to see.

“It’s going to be amazing,” the raccoon said confidently.

Ed wasn’t so sure. He certainly wanted to fix this place up, Indigo Park has a place in his heart that nowhere else could replace, but the amount of work this would need was beyond automation. Look what they had gone through just to get algae remover. Speaking of which-

“Speaking of which, what’s the algae remover for?”

Rambley winked. “It’s a surprise.”

“Is it for the pond over behind the treehouse?”

“Nooo, but don’t start guessing. You’ll ruin the surprise!”

“Is it for the fountain?”

“Mm-mm. Not getting any answers out of me.”
Rambley crossed his arms and shook his head.

That wasn't about to stop Ed from guessing.

But something else did.

There was a splash.

Both Ed and Rambley's eyes went wide. That splash sounded suspiciously close by. In fact, it sounded like it was coming from behind their cart. But it couldn't be another cart, not that close by. Not when Rambley went out of his way to make sure only one seashell was heading through.

Ed instantly leaned around the side of the seashell to look.

At first, he saw nothing.

Then he saw something briefly breach the dark water. A yellow, scaley lump that looked suspiciously familiar.

"Rambley..."

“Oh no, what are you looking at?” Rambley tried to look over the back without fully leaving the seat. “I’m too short to see.”

“Can Finley get into all the rides?” Ed asked with dread.

“Well, sure! This place was built for the mascots to be able to... interact with the... guests...” Rambley slowly trailed off as he realized what Ed was implying. “...He’s right behind us, isn’t he?”

“Oh yeah.”

“W-Well, we’re still safe! Because of the track, o-of the cart, he can’t possibly snack us up!” Rambley place a hand to his mouth unsurely. “Unless he pulls us out...”

“How would he do that?”

“With his tongue...”

Ed instantly sat back in the seat and as far away from that side as possible. Rambley grabbed ahold of his arm in a tight grip like he was preparing for one of them to get yanked out.

There was a low rumble. Something shifted under the track, causing the water to slosh around the entire cart. There was a bump and groan as the large form slid between track mechanics. Him being able to fit underneath signaling how deep the water really was.

Ed was holding his breath as he struggled to listen. Rambley was listening a little better, hunched on the safety bar holding on for dear life, eyes wide and darting around. Both knowing something was coming.

And yet somehow neither was prepared when it did.

Finley rammed into the side of the underwater track hard enough to shake the entire cart, but thankfully not enough to derail it. It did send a wave of slimy water splattering over the two, almost knocking Ed

over and knocking Rambley into him. Jugs tipped over in the floorboard of the cart, now half submerged in the water pooling there.

Ed held onto Rambley with one hand and the seat with the other, not willing to lose his grip on either. Rambley was scrambling back into Ed's side, staring wide eyed at the side of the cart that Finley had hit.

Both were waiting for another hit, but it didn't come. There was instead a splash, and the cart rocked a little from something moving around it.

Then Rambley heard something. It was a subtle slithering sound. So faint that Ed hadn't picked it up over the sound of his pulse in his ears and the recording of Finley talking about angler fish playing over the intercom. Rambley snapped his head and caught sight of a slimy pink protrusion creeping around the edge of the seashell right beside Ed's head.

"Ed, look out!"

Ed turned and saw the tongue and reflexively took a swing. Punching the tongue into the edge of the cart.

Finley released a gargled bellow and lurched up out of the water, and bit onto the side of the cart right where its tongue had been struck. His long fangs digging into the flimsy frame and his weight tilting the cart. The mechanics beneath the water barely holding it on from tipping over.

Ed was now the one scrambling back. When his leg got too close Finley gave a threatening snap, but Ed was too far away. Though at this angle he was struggling to stay back. The jugs sliding and sloshing around as well.

As horrified as Rambley was to see Finley like... like this. His friend acting like this monster. He recognized the danger Ed was in immediately and jumped into action, grabbing up the brush broom and striking Finley on the snout.

“St-Stay back! Get off!” Rambley yelled- pleaded- as he repeatedly smacked the serpent with the brush.

Finley shook its head a little- less out of pain and more irritation- and lurched with another bite. This time managing to get his fangs into the seat cushion, which tore easily.

This was bad. Rambley looked ahead and saw that they were about to approach a hill. It was narrow enough that they could probably lose Finley if they got through, but if they didn't lose Finley before they got through that would be the end of the line. Finley had to let go now.

Rambley spun the brush in his hand and swung its blunt side into Finley's eye. It mostly bounced off, but Finley reacted instantly. Releasing the cart which thumped back into place with a splash and recoiling in pain, falling back into the water right before they started ascending the hill.

"Eddie, hold on!" Rambley cried.

Ed didn't need to be told twice. He grabbed onto the safety bar with both hands, little more than a

handrest in its raised position, as they raised higher until they crested at the top.

He saw the sunlight at the top and for a few seconds he breathed easy.

And then they plummeted.

Ed's teeth clattered and clenched so hard that his jaw hurt and Rambley all but threw himself onto the mercy of the safety bar, hugging it in a death grip as they dropped. The cart grinding down the dried-out chute before tearing right through the shallow pool of stagnate water at the bottom and slowly losing speed as it reached a curve.

In that second, Rambley pried himself off the safety bar and grabbed a jug and tossed it off the ride, then another, then fumbled for the third and panicked when it wasn't there and instead tossed the broom out.

"NOW!"

Ed, who was getting the third jug from the corner of the floorboard, looking up in time to see Rambley's feet and tail as he dove out of the cart.

Ed processed it for a second before hearing a horrendously loud and wet tumbling noise from back at the drop. He got up and leapt off, pushing off the side with his foot and managing to land heavily onto the cobblestone ground outside of the ride.

He looked back in time to see Finley's enormous body racing down the chute and right after the seashell they just leapt out of. The shallow water riding up his sides and splash droplets out on Ed.

Finley continued after the cart and into another tunnel, none-the-wiser that the two had already escaped.

Rambley exhaled deeply in relief and wiped his forehead. "Whew! I think we just dodged a bullet there, Eddie... Eddie? Are you okay?"

“Yeah, I’m good,” Ed said, catching his breath. He turned towards Rambley and upon seeing him, he started to crack up.

“What’s so funny?” Rambley asked, smiling but nervous.

“You-! You LAUNCHED!” Ed gestured his hand to mimic the raccoon flying out of the cart with a whooshing noise. “I look up- all I see if your feet! You are GONE!”

And Ed was still laughing. Rambley was surprised, but began to snicker a little, and then began laughing with him, mostly out of relief. Cracking back with half-hearted defenses and reflecting on a terrifying moment like it had been the goofiest thing in the world. Laughing at them, laughing at Finley, laughing at the absurdity of all of this.

If anyone else would’ve heard them they might’ve thought it was just two guys having the time of their life.

And honestly, in a way, they were. Shortly after their escape from Finley and Oceanic Odyssey as a whole, Ed and Rambley returned to his treehouse. Carrying the jugs of algae cleaner which thankfully survived being tossed off the ride.

Once at the treehouse, Rambley pulled off his motion capture suit and cap and hung them to dry out on the gate. Taking extra care to lay them out with as few wrinkles as possible and making sure they didn't fall. Then he hurried inside to retrieve his handkerchief, soon walking back out while fixing it around his neck.

"Where to?" Ed asked.

"That's for me to know and you to find out shortly!" Rambley said. He looked to the pile of tools and hummed, rubbing his chin. "We miiight have to make two trips."

"Nah, I've got it."

Ed started picking up the tools and trying to balance them best as he could. Managing to get them evenly weight in both arms then picking back up the two jugs he brought. The weight wasn't a problem, it was more a struggle trying to balance everything in his grasp. Which he managed to do.

Rambley was impressed.

“Haven't missed arm day either have you, Big Guy?”

“As a specimen, yes, I'm intimidating.”

Rambley cackled and went to grab up the work gloves, the scrubbing brush, and the other jug.

“Well, if it gets too heavy, throw some of it my way! I could carry a little more!... Actually no. Do not throw it. You might take someone's eye out. And that someone's me.”

Ed chuckled and waited for Rambley to take the lead before following along behind him.

He wasn't surprised at all when their destination turned out to be the large fountain at the center of the square, the one with the turning Rambley statue spitting water from atop it.

"Here's our first project: fixing up the Fountain of Fun! It's the first thing parkgoers are going to see on their way into the main square. Except maybe the clocktower, but we can climb up and fix that some other time. But look! It's still working!" Rambley excitedly gestured his hands to the still running fountain. "All we have to do is give it a good cleaning. You up to it, Rangler?"

After the running around they did earlier, cleaning out a fountain seemed downright easy. And unlike everything else broken in the park, downright doable.

"Sure!"

So, they got to work.

Most of the hard work was pulling up the plants that had grown inside of the fountain. Unlike the ecosystem at Oceanic Odyssey, Rambley wasn't so keen on keeping this greenery around. For the most part it wasn't too difficult. A lot of it could be pulled up by hand and what couldn't was easily dealt with by the tools. Rambley even offered up the work gloves, which Ed used to keep a firm grip.

Speaking of which, Rambley was working his heart out. He was pulling of plants and measuring out algae remover, even applying some to the brush and using it to clean the fountain. He slowly made his way around the ring of the fountain, his eyes bright and eager and him humming as he went.

Though after a while, at least an hour of cleaning later, Ed noticed that he was slowing down. He still looked like he was doing all he could, but it was notably less lively. Yet he was still trying to push as hard as he could.

Ed stopped what he was doing and went to sit by him.

“Maybe you should take a break,” he suggested.

“Oh, I’m okay, Eddie! Just getting a little warm is all,” Rambley assured. He wiped his forehead with a soft ‘whew’.

“I know, but you’re still getting over being sick. Not to mention fighting off Finley. Come on, let’s take a five-minute break. The fountain’s not going anywhere.”

“True, but the fountain’s not going to get cleaned up on its own either!” Rambley then got a thoughtful look. “But now that you mention it, I really wouldn’t want that to flair up again... Good idea, Rangler! Just lemme just finish fishing out whatever this is and we break for five!”

Rambley leaned forward and tried to untangle some sort of banner from underneath the plants and out of a crack in the fountain’s bottom. His tail lightly swaying behind him, looking very soft and puffy.

Without really thinking about it, Ed reached out and patted the top of that puff. It was, indeed, very soft.

“Eep!” Rambley gave a startled squeak and fell forward face-first into the water.

Ed immediately pulled him back out.

“Sorry! I didn’t mean to spook you. You okay?”

Rambley sputtered and coughed a little, wiping the water off and out of his eyes and trying to reshape his cheek fur.

“I’m okay, I’m okay! A little more wet, but right as rain,” Rambley quickly assured. He got a mischievous look before splashing Ed with a handful of water. “There! Now we’re even.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“And for future reference, you can touch my tail anytime. Juuust make sure I’m not balancing precariously on something first,” Rambley clarified.

Removing his handkerchief and wringing it out with a toothy grin.

“I’ll try to remember that,” Ed said. He paused a moment before daring to ask, “...Can I?”

“Wait, really? Sure! Go for it!” Rambley’s eyes alit with excitement, and he willingly offered his tail to him.

Now Ed got a better feel. It was very soft, like the rest of his fur. Too clean and neat to be animal fur, much closer to something on an exceptionally plush teddy bear. The tail was no different.

It made him wonder how exactly Rambley was ‘grown’. He wasn’t a normal raccoon. In fact, it would be more accurate to say he just looked like a raccoon.

And was a far cry from the mascot he had replaced, that’s for sure.

“I take a lot of pride in keeping my tail soft, clean, and neatly brushed. Maybe not Lloyd levels of pride, but I can guarantee I am the softest raccoon you’ll ever squeeze!” Rambley said. He held out his arms in a pose. “And I don’t mean to brag but give great hugs.”

“I can imagine,” Ed said kindly.

He missed the brief look of disappointment on Rambley’s face. But Rambley shrugged it off and went back to sitting there smiling. Soaking up the attention like a sponge.

Whatever he was, he was unique from the other mascots. All of them, the freakish Rambley included, were much more animalistic. They looked like something bred and grown in a lap- except Finley. In the right light his scales made him look like an inflatable alligator, like the one he used to play with in the pool.

Speaking of Finley-

“By the way, thanks for getting rid of Finley back there. I forgot to say it earlier, but you really saved our skins,” Ed said thankfully.

“Don’t mention it! Finley is, uh... He’s not... He’s not himself right now. But if he was, he would be very apologetic!” Rambley assured with a lopsided little smile. Almost like he was apologizing for Finley.

“He’s... Yeah.” The less he said on Finley the better. “But don’t sell yourself short. If it wasn’t for you scaring him off, we’d probably be chunks in his teeth right now.”

Rambley grimaced but laughed. “Now THAT’S a nasty picture! But he would’ve come to his senses long before that happened.”

Ed was extremely doubtful of that, but he didn’t correct Rambley. Finley was just as bloodthirsty-looking as Lloyd was, and it wasn’t exactly the goodness of his heart that stopped him.

...Wait, no. It had been the Critter Cuff. But the Critter Cuff hadn't gone off with Finley, had it?

"Hang on a second. How come this didn't stop him?" Ed asked, showing off the cuff on his arm.

Rambley's brows raised like he too had forgotten that the Critter Cuff was there. He then started to get that nervous look that Ed was becoming familiar with.

"Heh. See, uh. Most of the time Finley's under the water, right? And he can't hear very well when he isn't. So, it doesn't work on him that well. It mostly works on Lloyd, and Salem, and, well, me."

"Wait, you? Then why doesn't it go off when we're together?" Ed asked in confusion.

"Because..." Rambley tightened his mouth guiltily.
"B-Because I set it off last time..."

Wait, he did?

It made sense, but something didn't add up.

"But you said you couldn't see me back there," Ed reminded.

"I couldn't!... On the screens." Rambley got an embarrassed little smile as he twiddled his fingers. "I was spying on you."

"Oh... Yeah, that makes a lot of sense actually," Ed said, taking it in. "That explains why it didn't go off with Mollie either. You couldn't see what was going on in the Landing Pad."

Rambley's smile fell, and he looked somber and remorseful. "I'm sorry."

"You saved my skin, what've you got to be sorry about?"

"Sneaking around spying on you, leaving out some important details about your new position, even suggesting for you to go to the Landing Pad in the first place. I had no idea it was like... that."

Ed believed him. By now he had been able to figure out when Rambley was being careful about his wording and when he was being fully honest, and this was completely honest. He was genuinely remorseful.

Rambley really thought that the Landing Pad was going to be safe. But then again, he thought Mollie herself was harmless.

“Rambley, that’s okay. You don’t have anything to be sorry for. I was just some guy who walked into a park, how could you trust that I wasn’t going to freak out? And I know you didn’t know about what was going on,” Ed assured. He started combing his tail with his fingers reassuringly, gently broaching into his next point. “I’m more worried about the stuff you aren’t telling me.”

Rambley was surprised. “Like... what?”

Well, this was as good a time as any.

“Like about your old body...”

Rambley looked horrified. It looked like his heart might’ve stopped. The fur on his tail immediately stood on end.

Ed continued, “I found a video from a long time ago that shows when they started the Meet and Greets and the Rambley there... it wasn’t you. Y’know, and you told me you had another body.”

“Oh right, I did...” Rambley said quietly. He sighed. “I guess you deserve to know, umm... But... But can we talk about it later? I’ll tell you later, I promise, I just don’t want to be thinking about it when we’re trying to work. Please.”

Maybe he was dodging again, but Ed thought it was only fair to give him this. He could imagine it was going to be a difficult conversation.

“Sure, but only if you do one thing for me.”

Rambley got a little smile. “Anything, Buddy. You name it.”

“Take a break.”

A look of relief washed over Rambley’s face. “Can do! I was starting to get a little hot again anyways. The fountain cooldown helped but I don’t know if I’d go swimming in this water.”

Ed looked down at the still largely green water. “Eh, I’ve swam in worse. We should probably get out of the sun. Any ideas on a good hangout spot?”

“Well, there’s always the café over there, but we still haven’t cleaned out the old food. Remind me to check there for some canned goods whenever we do.” Rambley thought for a second. “Actually, you know what I’d like to do?”

“What’s that?”

“Ride on my railroad. I haven’t done it since the park closed! What do you say?” he asked. His eyes filled

with hopeful pleading. There was no turning him down.

“Sounds like a plan!”

Rambley hopped off the fountain and followed alongside Ed as they made their way to Rambley’s Railroad.

Which required Ed to show him where to squeeze around the rubble to get into the entrance tunnel. He had gotten so used to climbing through that he did so easily. Rambley, though not having much difficulty, did so with excessive cautiousness. Looking at each piece of broken rebar like the entire park wasn’t covered in it.

“Ough, I think we might’ve chosen the wrong project to start on first...” Rambley mused as he carefully climbed through. He then gawked at a nearby pile of trash. “And who’s been eating takeout out here?!”

“Not me. I eat my takeout in front of a TV like a man,” Ed joked.

Rambley stuck his tongue out at the soured takeout box, though seemed to look at it a little too long before deciding to not even bother. He looked away only for his eyes to land on something else and widen. “What- Wait- The- The other side fell in too?!”

Oh right, Ed hadn’t mentioned that to him. In fact, he might have been willingly not bringing it up since that day he crawled through here sick as a dog.

“...Yes. But look! I moved some of the top away. I can squeeze through easy-peasy, totally safe.”

“Yes, and that’s great. I’d be crushed if you couldn’t come back. BUT this is also a pretty big problem. If guests can’t get in- guests might be crushed coming back!”

Suddenly Rambley’s dreams of reopening the park were hit with an unexpected setback. He had just been planning to repaint or reuse most of the rubble they couldn’t move, but this? This was a HUGE deal,

and it would take a whole lot more than a man and a raccoon and a couple of shovels.

Ed noticed his dismay. His worried frown with a hand raised to his mouth pensively, like he was considering saying something but didn't know what to say. His eyes scanning the rubble back and forth.

He had to get Rambley away from that disaster and on that train pronto.

“Don't worry about it. Let's just get to the, uh- hey! Look who it is!” He pointed to the Rambley posted nearby. “The coolest raccoon in the whole world.”

That downright forced a smile out of Rambley. “D'aww, Eddie! Nah.”

“And look who's right beside him!” Ed pointed to the Finley posted beside him. “The thing that's gonna be in my nightmares tonight.”

“Oh, he's not that scary!” Rambley tutted. His hands going to his hips.

“You weren’t the one he tried to lick.”

“Fair point. Okay, let’s head inside! We can worry about this... later.”

Rambley looked towards the rubble one last time while rubbing his arm before following Ed into the ride boarding station.

Just like with Oceanic Odyssey, the entrance to Rambley’s Railroad was still pretty dark despite it being daytime. Ed clicked on his trusty flashlight and began to step over the line gates.

“What are you doing?” Rambley said with surprise.

Ed gave him a confused look and a shrug. What did he think he was doing?

“...Well, I guess since there’s nobody else here...”
Rambley followed suit and climbed over. “Hey, that reminds me. So, that thing that you do online, where

you play games and make videos? What's that called?"

"It's called streaming. I play games and stuff like that, or record myself exploring abandoned places, and it streams online where people can watch it."

"Ooo! Very chic," Rambley complimented. "Did you plan on coming in here and recording?"

"Initially? Yes. But usually, I scout out the place first. Make sure it's safe before I start running around recording."

He was a little nervous that Rambley wouldn't take it so well, like when he caught him recording earlier, but he seemed more curious than suspicious.

"That's so cool! And a little dangerous. And possibly illegal? I'm surprised you haven't gotten in trouble for it!"

"Oh, I did. But don't worry, they dropped the charges."

Rambley looked startled.

“But yeah, playing it safe now. I used to do parkour too until I chipped these teeth.”

He pointed to a few teeth. If not for him saying he chipped them, they would’ve looked indistinguishable.

“What’s that? Par-core?”

“Like, climbing stuff. Buildings, walls, jumping around.”

“Climbing buildings?! You’re lucky you only chipped some teeth! But that explains why you were so sure you could climb the wall...”

Rambley wasn’t sure if he was impressed or a little nervous by that information. Maybe a little of both.

They arrived at the train and boarded. If the seats were awkwardly small normally then they were

downright crunched with Rambley trying to sit across from him.

“Y’know, I’m starting to think these seats are too small,” Rambley said with a thoughtful look.

“I think we’re out of the age range.”

“Nobody’s too old for trains! Besides, now you get to see a whole bunch of your favorite raccoon in the world,” Rambley said. Putting his hands on his cheeks and giving him a cutesy pose.

The train started up and rolled out of the station as the bouncy music faded in.

As they rolled into the canyon depot Rambley looked around with eyes filled with wonder. He hadn’t seen this place in a long while and it just wasn’t the same on camera. Here he could see all of it and, compared to Finley’s Flume, it wasn’t looking half bad!

As the lights flickered on, so did the screen depicting Rambley in his conductor hat.

Except he didn't say anything. He just stared ahead and blinked while the real Rambley was still looking around.

"Rambley, you're staring into my soul," Ed said.

"Oh! I haven't hooked on yet. Sorry!" Rambley said.

"So, this ride doesn't work without you? Did you have to be glued to it while the park was open?"

"Oh, no, no! There's an automatic mode where it fills in a fake Rambley and runs itself. But what's the fun in that? We're in manual mode right now! Manual mode lets me be a part of the ride and ride along with guests even when I'm not there! And adjust some... questionable lines along the way. That's why we haven't moved yet either, in case you're wondering."

Rambley hummed as he looked at his cartoon reflection's portrait at the station.

“But it's going to be much less immersive without my suit on. See, I can only control the eyes and expressions on my own. So... Oh! Wait, there's one way we can get Conductor Rambley back in action!”

Rambley hopped out of the cart and headed to the one behind it, a covered cart, and squeezed himself inside. He poked his head and arm out the window and made a twirl with his finger.

“Turn around!”

Ed moved into the opposite seat to face him. Rambley gave him a salute.

“Conductor Rambley reporting for duty!” he said with an excited grin. “I wish I had my hat with me.”

“You have a conductor hat?”

“I do!”

He had to see this hat when they got back to the treehouse. Though that wasn't the only thing he noticed.

"All aboard! We're ready to go!" Rambley cheered.

"Hey, wait," Ed interjected. He pointed to a picture on the wall. "What's that?"

Rambley cringed even before he looked back, knowing exactly what Ed had spotted. A picture depicting Lloyd handing a piece of paper to Rambley himself. The raccoon in the picture having a big, elated smile while the one on the train had a less than impressed frown.

"That's Lloyd giving me the deed to the park," Rambley muttered. "Or the deed to the railroad. Whatever."

"Right, there used to be a Lloyd ride here," Ed remembered.

Rambley lazily looked up at him. “Did you ever ride it?”

“No, I just heard about it online.”

“O-Oh! Of course! Right! You came here after I already the, umm, you rode my train back then!”
Rambley seemed to perk up fast. “Well, you weren’t missing out on anything. Lloyd’s Limos were super overrated. Ugh, trust me.”

Ed knew from how he talked about him that something serious must’ve happened between Rambley and Lloyd. That or he was just painfully jealous, and he knew he should probably discuss it with him.

And yet for some reason he found Rambley’s seething hatred for this flamboyant lion to be downright hilarious. Maybe not hilarious, but he had to suppress a smile whenever it crept out. Save that one time Rambley got really upset while talking about some old anniversary plush- there was no

smiling about that. The shade at Lloyd though? Ed was soaking that up.

The second Lloyd came into the conversation it was like a hidden mask slipped. It made Ed especially curious, and it made Rambley seem a little more... well, real.

“Well, let’s get moving!” Rambley announced.

The screen at the station flickered out and the train began to chug along without opening the windows on the back of the engine. Which was probably a good thing, or they would’ve probably smacked Ed in the back.

Rambley bobbed his head and swished his tail to the music, only held back slightly by the window. Though the big grin on his face showed that he was having a blast.

The music changes as they rolled into the Mollie Macaw section of the ride. Ed expected the following

scene to play out exactly like it had before. Except it didn't.

“And there's Mollie Macaw!” Rambley introduced, gesturing a hand towards her.

“It's Mollie Macaw! The greatest pilot you ever saw!!”

“You sure are, Moll! And look, I brought a new friend to meet you!”

Rambley's eyes unfocused.

“Say, those young adventurer- you've got along with you look like great pilot- greatest pilot you ever saw!”

Mollie's lines were obviously recuts of other lines shoved together. They sounded forced and inauthentic, but it was a cute little effect.

“Aww, you're too sweet, Moll. This is my new best buddy, Eddie! I was just giving him a tour of the park. But we've got to get moving! You get back to your crashing!”

“I’m not crashin’, Rambley! I’m barnstormin’!”

“Oh, right! Hehe.”

The ride didn’t start moving like Ed expected and instead Rambley turned his attention to him.

“So, as you know, Mollie is my best friend. Or she was, you two are sort of fighting for the spot right now. But don’t tell her that!” he said jokingly. “I can’t wait until you get to meet her! She’s going to love you.”

Ed felt his stomach tighten.

“...Uh... Rambley... Rambley, I don’t know if you saw what happened in that room-.”

But Rambley quickly interjected. Raising a finger in a matter-of-fact sort of way.

“Ah-ah! I meant the REAL Mollie Macaw! Not... Not the mascot, the AI behind the mascot- like me! She’s

out there somewhere.” He looked up at the cutout of Mollie with a small hopeful smile under slightly saddened eyes. “I know she is...”

That answer hurt almost as much as him being oblivious to Mollie’s death would’ve. Ed wouldn’t dare break that optimism.

“Maybe we’ll find her while fixing up the park?” he suggested.

“That’s what I hope!” Rambley agreed.

Rambley hoping and Ed questioning it; fitting. Finally, the train started to move and the music switched from a woodland rendition of the tune to a tropical version. They pulled up to Finley’s cave.

“Oh Fiiinleeey! You’ve got some explaining to do!” Rambley called.

The Finley cutout came out. “Hi, Rambley.”

“Don’t ‘hi Rambley’ me, buddy. You tried to eat me earlier! And my best buddy, Eddie! Now, what have you got to say for yourself, young man?”

“You’ve known me for one hundred years, Rambley.”

“...Okay, so not that young of a man.”

Rambley quickly glanced at Ed and was spurred on by his small chuckle.

“Well, what have you got to say for yourself?”

“I’m so lonely...”

“Hmm... Well, I suppose I can’t fault you for getting overexcited. But make sure to watch those chompers next time!” Rambley lightly scolded.

Just like with Mollie, Rambley had created a new conversation.

...But now after the little conversation about his friends still being out there, this little charade was actually kinda sad.

Why did Ed know that this wasn't the first time he spliced lines like this? Maybe because he did it so easily.

"Sooo, this is Finley. I'm sure you remember him from, umm, earlier. Heh. But, uh, he really is a nice guy! He likes seashells and the deep blue sea!... And that's about it. See, the problem with being as shy as Finley is that you can't let others in as easily. If only he'd open his shell and let us see the pearl that is his heart. Maybe once we find the real Finley! I just know you'll be able to get through to him."

"Just as long as you've got a broom on standby."

Rambley snickered, and the train kept moving.

This time, after some sputtering and skipping of the music, it successfully made it to a new track of the train tune. This one punctuated by brassy notes.

However, it was still the same broken-down segment that Ed had encountered last time he rode the train. Salem the Skunk's cutout lying broken under a mound of rubble and the whole room smelling especially of mildew and dry rot. Instead of glitching out- there wasn't a screen to glitch out- the train rolled up and stopped like it was waiting for another segment of dialogue.

Rambley looked at the damage with wide eyes.

"Oh no. The Salem exhibit... I wondered why the ride got stuck last time. Guess this explains it..."

His wide purple eyes scanned over the amount of damage and scrunched his nose, either from the visible decay or the smell.

"How'd you get it to start back up on you own?" he asked.

“I went on a little Rambley adventure through that back door over there. There was a missing gear... somehow.”

Now that he thought about it, it had to have been yanked loose by Mollie Macaw.

“You want to go look around?” he offered.

“Uh... No, thank you. I think I’m happy on the train,” Rambley nervously declined. “Salem wouldn’t want me poking around their stuff anyways. Hold on, let me get into character.”

Rambley cleared his throat before putting on his largest doe eyes.

“Oh no, Salem the Skunk! Who let you into the park?!”

He then filled in Salem’s dialogue himself, trying to put on a fake accent to match theirs.

Rambley cackled. “Who’d ya think? I let myself in. Not bad! But it looks like it could use some breaking in.”

Rambley growled. “Don’t you think about it, Salem! Indigo Park is fun for everyone, EXCEPT you!”

Rambley scoffed. “Yeah, yeah. Whatever. Hey, any of you kiddies feel like ditching this goody-goody, come find me in Spoiled Swamp. Now get outta here, Dumpster-Face!”

“Ayyyyy, Trash Panda!” Ed cheered.

Rambley looked to him in aghast. “No, not Trash Panda!”

Ed shot him finger guns with an especially dumb grin.

Rambley puffed his cheeks and pouted. “Are you done?”

“Yes. Sorry.”

“Now Salem here is the bad guy, I don’t think I need to tell you that. They are always causing trouble for me and my friends! And here at the park it’s no different. They used to have their own attraction called the Spoiled Swamp, but as far as I’m aware we’re off blocked from it. Which is a good thing because trust me, you don’t want to run into Salem the Skunk.”

“Wait, so there’s a Salem mascot too?” Ed asked.

“Unfortunately, yes,” Rambley mumbled. He noticed Ed’s uneasy look and slapped a smile back on. “But you don’t need to be worried! Like I said, the Spoiled Swamp’s on the other side of the park. I don’t know how we’d get there, let alone them getting here. And without me to open the doors? Fat chance!”

Rambley poked a thumb to his chest. “You’re in good hands, Eddie!”

Ed trusted Rambley, but that didn’t make the idea of yet another feral mascot any easier.

“Are there any more mascots that I should know about?” he dared to ask.

“Oh yeah, a ton! Well, a ton of characters. Only a few of the most popular made it to being a mascot. There’s me, Mollie, Finley, Alice, Gloria... and the rest! The park closed before they could make too many. They’re probably stuck in other parts of the park that we don’t have access to yet.”

“Wait, who’s Gloria?” That wasn’t an Indigo cartoon character as far as Ed was aware.

“Gloria the Gazelle! You know, Lloyd’s girlfriend?”

“They gave Lloyd a girlfriend?”

“Yup.”

“And they made her a gazelle?”

“Yup.”

“ ... ”

“It’s better to not think about it,” Rambley suggested.
“I just can’t believe that they gave Lloyd a girlfriend before anybody else.”

Ed got a little smile. “Do you want a girlfriend, Rambley?” he asked teasingly.

“No, but Mollie might’ve!”

...Okay, well. You learn something new every day.

“Now let’s get a move on!... Oh, wait. *Sigh* Speak of the devil. It looks like Lloyd’s up next. Joy.”

Ed tried to not look too excited.

Rambley looked less than thrilled as they rode up the slope and into the theater section. The music now switching to a boisterous band rendition. It sounded distinctly fancier than any of the others before it.

Rambley sighed. “Hey there, Lloyd.”

“Do not SHAME me with that COMMON FOLK name! I am the PRRROUD, the PRRRESTIGIOUS-!”

Rambley rolled his eyes.

“The PRRROFESSIONAL-!”

He gritted his teeth.

“Lloydford L. Lion, Actor Extraorrrrdinaire!”

“Great act, Lloyd,” Rambley said curtly.

He didn’t even come up with a fake conversation or anything. He kept it brief and disinterested.

Ed could just feel the seething hatred radiating off him, but he still didn’t understand why. He wondered if maybe there was a clue in the act itself. He never did hear the end of it.

He hadn't listened to Lloyd rolling his 'r's for ten plus seconds just to miss the end of whatever he was going to say. So, when the train started to move, he spoke up.

"Wait."

The train stopped as Rambley looked to him in confusion. "What's wrong?"

"Of course it was! I'm the rrreal star around here!"

"Ugh." Rambley rolled his eyes again and propped his head on his hand. He tapped his fingers on the windowsill in irritation.

"And what do I see? Are those aspiring thespians aboard your humble little train? How GRRRRRRRRAND! Why not come to LLOYD'S MAIN STAGE THEATER? Come see a SPECTACULAR SHOW, audition for a big role in our weekly community plays, and perhaps you can become a STAR just like me, LLOYDFORD L. LION!"

“Golly-gee, that sounds nice, Lloyd. But what’s a thespian? I’m too stupid to know,” Rambley muttered.

“Oh ho ho! Oh, Rambley, you are such a RRRRASCAL! Perhaps you should come along as well, and I can give you some one-on-one lessons? Hmm? It’s the least I can do for my park protégé!”

Oh. Ed put two and two together quickly. He looked at Rambley. Rambley was off somewhere in the rafters with an annoyed look and his tail swishing in agitation.

Ed figured out from their conversation earlier about what he found online, and other pretty obvious clues, that Rambley was jealous of Lloyd. But it was only now that he realized that it might’ve not just been something formed from Lloyd’s personality alone. Lloyd’s lines her sounded demeaning, even if they weren’t intended to be.

And Rambley must’ve heard those lines dozens of lines. How long until he got sick of them?

Ed started to point back down the track. “Let’s-.”

“Gosh, Lloyd. You’re just the coolest. Or wait, if you’re a star, you must be the hottest,” Rambley said sarcastically. “Real hot stuff. At least you think so.”

Lloyd gave a rousing laugh at whatever line Rambley was supposed to say. “I know! Now, rrrun along! Ta-ta!”

“UGH.”

With that last sound of frustration, the train started to move again. Ed sat there silently, dumbly, as Rambley continued to stew in the other train car.

Okay, so Ed could admit when he made mistakes. Not letting Rambley ride right on past Lloyd was obviously a mistake.

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?” Rambley asked. He still sounded peeved but not at him.

“For making you stop.”

Rambley sighed, not out of frustration but of defeat.

“No, it’s okay. You wanted to hear what he was going to say. That’s part of the ride,” Rambley said. He coiled his tail around himself protectively. He was hurt.

Rambley was bummed out, Ed was feeling bad- the tension could’ve been cut with a knife at this rate. Ed felt obligated to say something.

...

“I didn’t remember Lloyd being such a-.”

Rambley slapped a hand over his own mouth in shock at the word that came out of Ed’s. He looked to him in surprise with big glassy eyes, and Ed suddenly realized he might’ve gone too far.

If not for Rambley starting to crack up. He was trying his hardest not to, but he couldn't stop himself.

"I know! He's awful, isn't he?!" he laughed. He wiped a tear from his eye. "That's not the word I'd choose, but oh boy, it fits!"

Ed breathed a sigh of relief. Then made a mental note to watch his mouth. Just in case Lloyd was the exception.

The train rolled up to a stop at the exit station and Rambley hopped out of his little train car and onto the platform.

"Sooo, what did you think?" he asked.

"I think it's better with the live commentary," Ed said.

"Oh, good! I know I went off script a few times, but I thought that since you've been on the ride recently, I would have to to match that new and informative experience!"

They waltzed into the giftshop and up to the desk. Above which was a purple banner with white letters that spelled out: Trackside Memories- Get Your Ride Photos Here! Behind it was a wall of screens displaying various pictures taken during the train ride, though nearly half of them were darkened out.

“Hey! How about we pick out a photo to print as a souvenir? I’m sure the printers must still be working!” Rambley offered.

“Sounds good!... How about that one?”

He pointed at one towards the middle. Both of them were visible in it, and Rambley even had a big smile and was looking almost in the camera’s direction. The only problem with the photo was Ed.

“Hmm, I don’t know. It’s a good picture of me, but it only shows the back of your head.”

Ed gave him a confused look. Rambley looked back to the pictures and soon realized that all of them

were only of the back of his head. Because he switched seats.

“...Oops.”

“Don’t worry about it. If I wanted to see myself, I’d look in a mirror. Let’s take that one.”

“Consider it done!”

Rambley darted around the desk to poke around one of the registers while Ed looked around at the gift shop. It wasn’t more than a minute later before Rambley returned to his side.

“It’s just going to take a little bit to process and print. We’ll just hang out in here while we wait,” Rambley suggested. Then he caught sight of the merchandise. “Ooo, I didn’t notice there was this much stuff left in here. *Gasp* And it’s in excellent condition! Well, maybe not excellent, but fair at the least! These ears are almost good enough to be sold!”

He rushed over to look at the ears, and then the shirts, smiling happily as he did. Grimacing for a second at the dirty plushies, and quickly turning back to Ed.

“Isn’t it nice to have a gift shop that isn’t stuffed with a bunch of Lloyd junk?”

Honestly, considering how Rambley flipped the last time he saw a Lloyd plush, yes.

That being said, the stuff in here was pretty cute. He already had a figure and a plush, but neither of the shirts.

“How much for a shirt?”

Rambley’s eyes lit up. “You really want one?!” Ed nodded. “That’s fantastic! Come over here, I think these are the adult-sized ones. Or at least the biggest kid ones we’ve got!”

The raccoon excitedly flipped through the hanging shirts.

“Now the Indigo Park logos are a classic, buuuut I recommend the Rambley t-shirt. Especially since I know how much you like my tail,” he said cheekily.

Ed couldn't argue with that. He looked through a couple before pulling out one that had been mostly protected from dust. It was one of the Rambley shirts; resembling his fur and belly with his red neckerchief depicted on the collar and a tail depicted on the back.

Ed vaguely remembered asking his mom if he could get one during a visit a long time ago. She had reminded him that if he could only buy one thing, so he had passed. This time he had his own money to blow.

“How much?” he asked.

“It's on the house! You've earned it!”

“No, come on. Let me pay. It's the least I can do.”

Rambley was a little surprised, but then appreciative. “Well, if you insist. But I’m going to be giving you the Royal Rangler discount, no buts!”

He eagerly grabbed the shirt from Eddie and whisked him back to the desk to ring it up on the register. He had a little difficulty, having to actually unfocus and enter the system to work around some bugs- tapping his fingers on the desk as he did so- but managed to get it to work.

“That’ll be thirty dollars and fifty-nine cents!”

Ed almost wished he hadn’t. But he knew he couldn’t take it back now and handed over some bills from his wallet.

“Keep the change.”

“Thank you! All of this is going right towards park maintenance and repairs!... Or maybe to pizza,” Rambley mumbled behind the bills. He stashed them into the register for now, making a note to come

back and get them before they headed back to the treehouse.

Ed slung his new shirt over his shoulder as Rambley finally retrieved their picture. It was-!... Well, it wasn't perfect. Again, all he could see was the back of Ed's head, but it would always remind him of today.

And what a day it had been- and it wasn't even over! Crazy, wild day. The kind of day that really made a raccoon feel alive.

It was a shame that it was already halfway over. That they didn't get a picture together to remember it by.

Ed noticed his prolonged silence. "Everything okay?"

"Hmm? Oh! Yes, I'm fine. I was just thinking," Rambley said. "...Hey, umm..."

He gave Ed a sheepish smile.

“Do you wanna... ride again and get a better picture?”

How could anyone say no to that?

Besides, it would be nice to have one with his face in it. The second time around Ed and Rambley got a much better photo. One with Ed sitting in the proper seat and waving in the general direction of the unseen camera while Rambley, squeezing through the window behind him, had an arm around his shoulders and was throwing the peace sign with a wink.

Rambley had been gushing over the photo since they had printed it out. He had been so proud of it that he dropped everything to take it home so it wouldn't get damaged. Ed accompanied him, bringing his own photo- he kept the original because he liked the goofiness of it- and tucking it into the safety of his backpack.

Then it was back to work! Scrubbing and cleaning out the fountain one small section at a time. It was a

lengthy effort but soon enough the fountain was looking as good as new. The water was still a little murky, but the rest was looking much better, and all the weeds had been removed and now sat in a couple of messy piles.

Rambley was staring to slow down again, but by then he was scrubbing the spinning statue with the long broom, his last task. He had a beaming smiling as he did so, so Ed let him finish up.

By time they finished, it was late afternoon and felt like it was finally starting to cool down.

“Want to go get some lunch?” Ed asked.

“It’s a little too late for lunch, isn’t it?” Rambley said thoughtfully.

Ed quirked a brow and looked back at the clock... only to see the hands still spinning. Oh yeah, that was a project for a reason.

“Ooo, did you want to get started on the clock?!”
Rambley said. “Or at least see if we can get to the clock and scout it out?”

“Eh, maybe later. I need to take a break. Let’s head back to your place.”

Rambley knew he was tired. He himself was tired, and he knew they were overdue for a breather.

...But he hadn’t forgot about that little talk Ed wanted to have, and he doubted Ed had either.

It wasn’t that he would or could avoid it forever, but he really didn’t want to talk about it yet. He wanted to keep the fun going! He wanted to keep playing around and having a good time!

He looked around desperately for something, anything, and that was when his eyes magnetized to the colorful Ferris wheel standing above the park. He broke into a beaming smile. There we go!

“Hey Eddie, we never rode the Ferris Wheel!”
Rambley pointed out. “I can’t believe I took you to Jetstream Junction AND Oceanic Odyssey before taking a spin on the Ferris wheel. We should go! If we ride it twice, we might even get to see the sunset from the top.”

Ed turned back to look. The Ferris Wheel had been one of the few things in the park that was standing when he first walked in and even now it went through the motions like the park never closed. But...

“Are you sure that’s safe?”

“Sure, it is! It’s still spinning, isn’t it?”

Well, it was hard to argue with that. Surely if it was broken there’d at least be a few lights off.

It would probably be a good place to get a view of the entire park, but it would also be very high. Ed could handle heights of ten, twenty feet fine, but sometimes being up that high made him a little

uneasy. A little lightheaded. But it wouldn't be that long. A few minutes at most, he could handle that, right?

"Are you sure?" Ed asked.

"Sure, I'm sure! After all, you still owe me a date. And what's a better date spot than the top of a Ferris Wheel?"

When did he-? Well, if Rambley said it then it probably was true. Better get up there.

Getting to the Ferris Wheel involved climbing over some rubble and continuing down main street before taking a sharp turn past some old shoppes towards the Ferris Wheel.

They passed the Sweet Treat Confectionary, which Ed remembered visiting once years ago. He could still see old candy stuck in the numerous dispenser tubes, with the hard candy retaining most of its color but likely not safe to eat. They passed Alice's

Teacups too, which while being a little dirty looked like they too might still be in functional condition.

Rambley gushed over everything they passed too. Clearly, he hadn't come down here in a long time even though he knew where it was. Even though his home wasn't that far away.

But with Lloyd and Mollie, and possibly Salem, running around Ed didn't blame him.

The Ferris Wheel was in startlingly good condition up close. Sure, there was some greenery overgrowing the flowerbeds near the base, but the ride itself only had some weathering and paint fading. It looked sturdy.

Rambley hooked into the system and got the wheel to come out of its idle spinning and stop for them to board. The climbed into one of the blue baskets and sat across from each other and were soon lifted into the sky.

Ed's stomach tightened momentarily looking out of the basket, but it wasn't as bad as he expected. Largely because of the closed in basket. When the dizziness crept up, he'd just look back at the floor of the basket and it would take the edge off for a moment. It was just a ride; he had been on dozens of them and this wasn't even the most dangerous one today.

He spotted a familiar silver sphere standing tall in the distance, the top of it slightly caved in.

"Hey, there's the ball! I remember that."

"Yup! The Sphere of the Future! And see that big building behind it?" Rambley pointed at it.

"I see it. What's that?"

"THAT is the brain of Indigo Park! The Headquarters, offices, and laboratory are all located in that building! That's also where the servers are stored for the screens and where all the work behind the scenes

happens. Including the creation and training of mascots.”

Now that was very interesting thing there.

“Were you made there?” Ed asked.

“I sure was! I don’t remember how, but I know that must’ve been where it happened. Oh! And see that over there? That funky looking area waaay over that way?” Rambley pointed towards a boggy looking area. “That’s the Spoiled Swamp Salem was talking about! Try to stay away from there, m’kay?”

“A poison swamp full of skunks? How could I resist?”

Rambley chuckled. “Okay, okay. That over there are the Indigo Studios. And that big ride in the back? That’s the Hyperwarp Mayhem! It was from the movie ‘The Great Indigo Space Race!’. That was the one where Finley gets abducted by aliens to be in an intergalactic freakshow after he gets mistaken as the Loch Ness Monster, and me, Mollie, Lloyd, and

newcomer Zoey the Astro-Squirrel have to go to space to find him.”

Ed vaguely remembered that one. At least, he remembered the unintentionally frightening segment when Finley got abducted by aliens. It was probably about time to watch that again.

“Gosh, there’s so much to talk about. Look at all of this!” Rambley gushed. He propped his head on his hands on the railing and looked down, tail swishing excitedly behind him.

Ed sputtered as the fluff caught him in the mouth.

“Whoops, sorry!”

“Nah, it’s cool.” Ed softly patted the tail back. “So, uh... why’d this place close?”

“Oh, uh. I’m not really sure...” Rambley mumbled out the side of his mouth.

“Rambley...” Ed sighed. “No, really. What happened? I know there’s got to be a story.”

“Mmm...” Rambley sunk a little on the railing, but then sighed and sat back down in his seat. “To tell you the truth, I’m not entirely sure. Honest. There was some sort of accident at the park eight years ago, but none of the footage of it was saved and I wasn’t in the system when whatever happened happened. All I know is that it sounded like it came from the theater, so it was probably Lloyd.” He mumbled out the end, then crossed his arms and looked aside sourly.

Ed had a feeling he was a little biased.

“But...” Rambley got an uneasy look. “The Ranglers were afraid of me afterwards. Whatever happened it must’ve involved one of the mascots, and Lloyd’s the only one with enough power to... really hurt someone.” He squeaked out under his hand which preemptively covered his mouth. “You know, my friends only went feral after the park closed but... they’ve always been like this.”

Ed blinked. “What do you mean?”

“Well... You see how I’m the real Rambley, right? I talk, I walk, I can mix a mean drink when I want to! But... the others... when they got their bodies, they weren’t like me. Mollie was the only one who could talk, but even then, she just repeated phrases she heard enough times. And Lloyd? You’ve seen him. He’s not the pompous prrrroffesional prrriss that he’s supposed to be. Lloyd is... he’s like a lion. Like a real lion. I-I know this must all sound confusing...”

“No, I get it. I’ve seen the difference.” Ed took it in. They were like freed circus animals; that made a lot of sense.

“And the truth is... they didn’t treat the mascots well. Because they were wild, they kept them in cages and... other things... Collars sometimes.”

Ed got an uneasy look. “You...?”

“Not me! No, they treated me a lot better! I might look like a normal raccoon, but I have the mind of a computer! I got my own house and everything,” Rambley said defensively.

The house the enclosure, Ed remembered.

“My point is, I wouldn’t be surprised if Lloyd just... snapped. I know it probably sounds like I’m blaming him because he’s him, but I don’t know who else it could’ve been!”

Ed wasn’t sure why he had a sudden mental image of the hideous other Rambley. Right then he knew he had to ask. And he was about to when he noticed the Ferris Wheel slowing down.

He looked around, realizing they were still up pretty high.

“Rambley, what’s going on? Are we stopping?”

“Seems like. Don’t worry about it though, this is completely normal! The ride routinely stops to let

guests off. It probably just got confused and stopped early. We'll keep moving in a minute," Rambley said.

He seemed unconcerned so Ed kept his eyes away from looking down and forced himself to not be either. He had bigger things to worry about. Hideous things with mask-like faces and gaping toothy grins.

"Well, since we've got a minute," Ed started. "What's the deal with that old body of yours?"

Rambley must've forgotten all about it as a look of dread crossed his face. He covered it with a squeamish smile.

"Oh yeah, you were asking about that... Well, umm... Okay! So, my body was made first, I think. And I was uploaded into it to become the park's first mascot! But there was a mysterious error and the next thing I know, I was back on the screen and the body had failed. It wasn't until way later that they tried again because they were afraid the same thing would happen. They... They thought maybe I didn't adapt the right way, and they were probably right. I

was scared so maybe I didn't sync up to the body like I was supposed to."

He twiddled his hands together and down at the floor. As though it was his fault.

Ed didn't know a thing about any of the science behind this, but he knew it couldn't have been his fault.

"What was it like?" he asked.

"Funny enough, I don't really remember..." Rambley rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "The whole switching bodies thing must've wiped my memory banks, because all I can remember is going in and then waking up back out of it. And some time had passed, so I was in the body for a while... Oh well! Probably better I don't remember. You've seen that body. You know how... err, unintentionally off-putting it looks."

"That's a good way to describe it," Ed agreed.

But he still found himself bothered. Rambley seemed to be being upfront with him, right? So, why did he feel like there was something he was leaving out?

“Can I ask you one more thing?”

“Sure!”

“And I need you to be honest, one-hundred percent honest with me,” Ed pressed.

“I’ve... I’ve been honest with you, Eddie.” Rambley gave an uncertain smile, waiting for Ed to agree.

“...Right?”

“Sometimes when you’re telling me about things I know you’re leaving stuff out. You’re picking and choosing your words on what to tell me,” Ed said. He looked him in the eyes, silently pressing for answers. “...I just want to know why.”

Rambley looked away. His ears lowering as he shrunk into himself. He rubbed his arm, and his tail started to curl around himself protectively.

“Because if you knew everything, you would leave...”

“I’m not going to leave.”

“No, you would.” Rambley looked sadly down at the park before getting a little smile. “I want you to see the park like I see it... not like how it really is.” He sighed and slumped sideways against the wall. “It’s a mess. There’s garbage and rubble everywhere. You can barely walk. We barely made it this far. That’s not the real Indigo Park, and I don’t want all of this changing your memories of what it used to be! It used to be great...”

It dawned on Ed that maybe Rambley wasn’t just trying to convince him.

Rambley got a- somewhat forced- smile and pointed out in the distance.

“But it won’t be like this forever. Look at what we got done today! Look at the fountain. See how good it looks?”

Ed looked out and saw the fountain in the distance, just barely seeing it peek around a building.

“It looks great.”

“If we can do just that much every day then we’ll be back in business in no time! And maybe...” Rambley trailed off.

“Maybe?”

There was a long pause.

Then all of a sudden, the luster left Rambley’s eyes. He slowly slouched.

“Maybe?” Ed tried again.

He dropped his head into his hands.

“Rambley?” Ed asked in concern.

“I’m okay. I just... need a minute.”

His voice was so low that it almost didn’t sound like him. It actually hurt hearing it.

Ed wanted to do something, but he didn’t know what to do. He started to reach out for his shoulder, but Rambley lifted his head before he could.

“It’s just that working on the park and riding the rides, and talking about reopening... it brings up a lot of old memories,” Rambley quietly admitted. “I miss my friends. And I don’t just mean when the park closed. I mean before that. Before they became mascots... back when we were all in the system together. When we were together. They were my whole world and now they’re all gone... You’re the only one I have left.”

Rambley swallowed thickly and blinked rapidly.

“Maybe if we fix the park, we can bring them back... You’d love Mollie. She’d love you too, I just know it.”

It was devastating.

“Umm... Rambley... Buddy, I don’t know if you saw what happened in that room...”

“That- That wasn’t Mollie. That was just a body. Just like with me, it was just a body,” he repeated like a mantra. “All of my friends are still alive somewhere. They’ve got to be! They would’ve had backups after what happened to me, right? They could- There’s a backup somewhere with Mollie and Finely and I just... I just don’t know...” he finished in a mumble.

Ed had a rock in his stomach after all of this. It sounded like Rambley really did believe all of this, and that was... terribly sad. Ed couldn’t bear breaking his heart by telling him the truth about the park. It seemed like that was what he was clinging onto for all these years.

...Maybe if they could find a way to bring his friends back it would somewhat take the blow off the inevitable realization that the park was too far gone for one man and a raccoon to fix alone.

“...What would we have to do to bring your friends back?”

Rambley looked at him with a start.

“What...?” he asked quietly.

Had Ed really-? He did. He saw the sincerity on his face. He really meant it.

“You... You’d really do that? Even after Mollie and Finley went after you?”

“They’d be like you, right? Not them?”

He really meant it.

“Yes! Of course they would! They would be totally like their normal selves; they just wouldn’t have

bodies like me.” Rambley’s eyes glistened. “If we could do that-! That would be incredible. I miss my Mollie! And Finley! Not Lloyd, but it seems unfair to not wake him up.”

“So, how would we do this?” Ed asked.

Rambley was getting more excited, more hopeful, beaming as he rambled.

“Well, let me think... Okay, first off! We would have to find the backups of their AIs. I don’t know where they are, but I’d bet money that they would be somewhere in the labs! Hopefully the upper labs and not the lower ones connected to the utility tunnels. Then we would have to upload her into the park’s systems and, presto! Mollie Macaw is back! Finley has returned! Lloyd is there too,” Rambley listed off. “Getting them bodies would be way more difficult. Unless they have some frozen in the labs, I don’t think we’ve got what we need to grow new ones- but that doesn’t matter! All that matters is they’d be here!”

Ed agreed. Especially since Frankenstein-ing any mascot bodies to life seemed like a really bad idea considering how the others turned out.

“So!” Rambley pointed out to the Headquarters building. “That is where we’d need to go!... The only problem is, it’s not exactly a walk in the park to get there. It’s pretty much blocked off from guests normally and now with all this damage... Reaching it isn’t going to be easy, and I wouldn’t risk going underground with how shaky the foundation is.”

“We can make it,” Ed said. “You just look around and see what’s the best way to get there.”

“We’re really going to do this, aren’t we?” Rambley asked in quiet awe. His eyes wide and filled with hope.

Ed smiled and gave a sincere nod.

“Oh Eddie, thank you! Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you! I-I don’t know how I could possibly repay

you-?! You and me- we're doing this! We're saving the park, we're saving my friends! Oh, come'ere!"

Rambley took the plunge and thrust himself towards Ed, wrapping his arms around him in a tight hug. Laughing in delight as he clutched to him like the lifeline he was.

But underneath that he thought,

"Please hug back. Please hug back!"

...

And then Ed did.

The moment he hugged back, Rambley was awash with warmth. His entire body tingled and there was an overwhelming relief, like he had been holding his breath for years. He hadn't been so excited and yet so comforted in, gosh, ever. He felt so safe, so fulfilled.

He had never been hugged like this either. The few brief instances he could remember were with kids. A few seconds each, don't get too close, don't hold on too long, and take a step back as soon as you're done. Otherwise get reminded by a Rangler in front of guests- so embarrassing!

But here, Ed wasn't pulling away or pushing him back. He was just holding him, like he had no intention of pulling away. Rambley didn't either. He couldn't bear to pull away, even if it would make things weird.

He needed it.

Ed figured out that he needed it too.

Considering how often Rambley brought up hugs, he supposed that he had been hinting towards them, but Ed had been hesitant to take the plunge. If not for Rambley's initial hesitation when they met, then the way he sprung into the fountain earlier. He didn't know how to approach without scaring the guy.

Apparently, he didn't have to. He just had to wait until Rambley leapt at him. That gave him the all-clear.

And Rambley was so happy. He had thought that maybe Ed was never going to hug him! Maybe that was a boundary... which he might've carelessly shoved through, but Ed didn't seem uncomfortable or hesitant, and Rambley really, really needed it. He needed that assuring squeeze, that hand rubbing his back, that physical feeling of not being alone in the whole world.

This was the best day ever.

...

"...Hey, Rambley?"

"Yes, Best Rangler in the Whole World?" Rambley asked. Nuzzling his cheek into his shoulder and wrapping his tail around him.

“...Is the Ferris Wheel supposed to stop for this long?”

Rambley’s eyes snapped open.

That Ferris Wheel should’ve definitely been moving by now.

He pulled away and stuck his head out over the railing before looking around, and much to his dismay he found that the Ferris Wheel still frozen in place. The lights were still on, so it was still functioning, but it wouldn’t budge. He unfocused his gaze and checked in on the specs, trying to figure out what he did and trying to fix it.

He was rewarded with a pop-up in the center of his mind warning him that the Ferris Wheel needed to be manually reset. It would be as simple as flipping a switch... a switch located on the control panel on the ground.

“Uh oh...”

“Is this the part where you say you’re afraid of heights?” Ed asked with a little smile.

“Wha? Me? Rambley the Raccoon? Rambley the Raccoon of Rambley’s Indigo Park, home of the longest rollercoaster this side of the state?! You’ve got to be kidding me!” Rambley said.

“Good.”

“Is this the part where you say you’re afraid of heights?” Rambley asked playfully.

“No. This is the part where I say that I’m about to pass out.”

“What?”

Ed still smiled but was dead serious. Rambley was understandably alarmed.

“I thought you used to ride the rollercoasters!?”

“It’s just a little different.”

“You were going to climb over the gates!”

“Just a little higher up here.”

Well, that wasn't good. Of course, none of this was good. Rambley knew that the handyman wouldn't pick up the phone and nobody else would just stumble up to reset the ride.

Looks like he was going down there himself. Well, good! He'd rather do it than let Ed risk his skin doing it.

Rambley sighed. “It looks like I'm going to have to climb down and reset the ride.”

Ed's already forced smile dropped instantly. “Wait, what?”

“Don't you worry, Buddy! This stuff is fairly in my wheelhouse,” Rambley joked.

He stepped onto his seat and started to climb up onto the railing. That got Ed shooting upright from his own seat.

“Whoa, hold on. You can’t climb down there,” Ed said. He grabbed Rambley’s arm to stop him. “If you fall you’re done for. And I won’t be able to get down to you.”

Ed’s worry gave Rambley that fuzzy feeling that made him want to do something dumb just to show off.

“It’s a good thing I won’t fall then! I just happen to be an excellent climber. I wouldn’t be doing this if I didn’t know what I was doing, promise!”

That didn’t make Ed feel anymore comforted. He dared to look out and reminded himself how high up they weren’t. They might’ve not been at the very top, but they were very close to it.

“Can’t you just hook on and turn the ride back on from here?”

“I already tried. It’s asking for a manual reset, and that means either shutting off power to it or flipping the reset breaker. Either way I have to get down to the ground to do it.”

Ed really didn’t like the sound of it but sighed and slowly let his hand drop from Rambley’s arm. The raccoon smiled wider, encouraged by the other’s belief in him- even if it was largely out of having no options.

He could do this no problem! And Ed would probably think he was pretty cool after he did since he used to climb buildings. Not tall buildings, apparently.

Rambley climbed up onto the railing and atop the roof of the basket. The wind ruffled his fur as he looked around at what he had to work with. Then carefully teetered along the short bar to the edge of the rim.

He could probably climb down here using the bulbs as a ladder, but the safer option was to make it to

the middle and climb down the bars there as they would be much closer together. Though that meant a perilous balance across the bar to the center, which was already slightly titled down.

Rambley looked over to see Ed watching. He smiled and waved at him, and Ed gave him a crooked smile. He was definitely going to be watching- great!

Rambley got down onto the bar, hooking his ankles underneath it and using his hands to shimmy along until he reached the next vertical bar, which he then maneuvered around. He couldn't remember the last time he did anything like this, but it felt almost natural.

Well, of course it did! He was a raccoon! He grinned as he continued along.

It didn't take too long until he made it to the center, though he did notice that he was feeling a little winded once he got there. Probably just because he had been working all day, he reasoned. Then it was

a matter of climbing downward. He grabbed one of the bars and started to lower down.

Almost instantly his arms faltered and his weight dropped, with him hanging from the bar. He gasped a little at the suddenness of it, but his hands held, even as his arms tingled.

He was feeling a little funny. His lungs were heavy and empty, like he had just run a mile, and his heartrate thrummed in his chest. Weird, but it was probably because he had been working so much.

He got his feet on the bar below and let go, quickly bending down to grab it and secure him. He took a moment to catch his breath, shaking his head and trying to physically shake out the fuzziness.

He was fine! He was almost there. Kinda. Sorta. He could at least see the ground better. He grabbed the bar tightly and started to lower himself down, his arms aching as they lowered and held his weight.

This time his feet couldn't reach the lower bar so he had to focus on where to drop, but the second he was dangling he felt that pounding in his chest and floaty feeling in his head. His eyes fluttered at the feeling and he tried to focus on where his feet were and where the bar was beneath him.

He started to become a little nervous and tried to pull himself back up to rest, but he didn't have the strength. He couldn't even do a basic pullup without his arms giving out.

For a second his vision got a little cloudy and splotchy. His hands felt tingly and weak.

And then they gave out.

In an instant Rambley was falling, and in that second, he flipped from on the verge of fainting to suddenly being wide aware. His heart leapt into his throat, and he only had time to gasp.

He landed on the bar below heavily on his backside and had to scramble to grab on before he could fall

right off. He gasped in air as he hung on for dear life. Eyes wide, pupils shrunk.

“Rambley?!” Ed called down.

“I’m fine! I was just dropping down!” Rambley cried out.

It wasn’t technically a lie...?

Okay, so apparently he wasn’t totally better, but he was much closer to the ground now. He made a mental note to not do any more dangling and instead sidled towards the metal ring that held the bars he was climbing down. He hooked his arms and legs around it and shuffled down awkwardly. Slow and steady.

The breeze was finally starting to cool him down now. It was a little comfort as he shuffled to the next bar, and then down even further. He slid a little but clutched and slowed himself before making to the next bar.

Finally, finally, he dropped down the last gap and landed heavily on his feet onto the base of the Ferris Wheel. He immediately bowed over with his hands on his knees and took in a few deep breaths. He was exhausted, but he knew Ed could maybe still see him. He gave a thumbs up upwards if he could see.

“I made it!” he called.

“Great! Good job!” Ed called back.

“I’ll have you down in no time!” Rambley called again. Then he straightened up and shuffled over to the Ferris Wheel controls. He fiddled around before popping open the underside hatch and flicking the reset switch.

The Ferris Wheel powered down. There was a beat. Two. Three. Then the lights came back on, and the Ferris Wheel entered back into its idle spinning.

With Ed now on his way down, Rambley flopped back on the ground and just laid there as he

watched the wheel turn above through tired, lidded eyes.

Maybe Ed had a point about taking regular breaks. He closed his eyes as his heartrate finally started to even out.

He heard a thump and realized it was Ed hopping out of their basket before it had totally reached the ground. He opened his eyes and spotted him hopping the railing and running over.

“Are you okay?!”

“I’m fine! Just taking a little break,” Rambley said. He sat up, resting back on his hands. “Whew!”

Ed smiled. “Think it’s time to head back to the house?”

“As soon as I get feeling back in my feet.” He shook them a little for emphasis.

“Want me to carry you?”

Carry him? Could he even- okay, one look at his arms showed that he was very capable of carrying him. Rambley could just see it now! His best pal toting him around in his arms like- it would be just like a hug!

...But he couldn't do that. No, that would be silly.

"I appreciate the offer, Buddy, but I don't want to be a burden!"

Ed didn't like how cheerfully that 'burden' came out.

"But I think calling it a day is a great idea."

Ed offered his hand and Rambley thankfully took it and got back up, feeling a little better now. He was still winded, but he was sure he could make the climb to get across the park.

By time they arrived at the plaza surrounding the treehouse, it was officially sunset. Rambley kept his eyes on the mango-colored sky.

He felt good! He was worn out, but he really, really felt good.

He grabbed his motion capture suit off the gate on his way in. It had dried up for the most part, so he folded it over his arm to carry it in, grabbing the cap too.

But halfway down the path to the door he stopped and turned back.

“Hey, Eddie...” Rambley began quietly. He looked up at him with a big smile. “Thank you for helping me today.”

“No problem. Happy to help.”

“You’re the best,” Rambley said. His eyes almost glistening with joy. “And today? It’s been a pretty good day!”

“You know, it kind of was,” Ed agreed.

Sure, they almost got eaten that one time and they spent a lot of it knee-deep in algae, but this was pretty much exactly what he signed up for and he wasn't disappointed.

"I'm glad to be here," he said truthfully.

Rambley was too. It was the first time in a long time that he had really taken a good look at the park and really felt realistically hopeful. That he wasn't alone on this. That someone had his back. That they could do this.

But without that creeping dread of what he was going to do if he couldn't.

Maybe the rides didn't work as they good when the park closed. Maybe the food was moldy, and the fountain was kinda gunky- until they cleaned it out- but today the park felt more alive than it had the day it closed. All thanks to Ed!

Rambley looked to the side like he was considering something for a long second, then looked back.

“Hey, Eddie, come here for a second.”

Ed quirked a brow and stepped closer. Rambley beckoned him with his hand to lean over, like he was going to whisper something to him. Instead, he hooked him into another hug which Ed returned.

Rambley didn't say anything, he just hugged him. That's all that needed to be said.

And it was just as good as it was earlier.

After a few quiet, comfortable seconds, he pulled away.

“Now I think we deserve a real break! I'll put the kettle on, and you can pick out what we're going to watch,” Rambley chirped.

He hugged his suit to himself before hurrying inside to get everything ready.

Ed didn't follow in immediately, instead taking a moment to look around and make sure nothing was out there. There wasn't. Nothing except the sunset and the park.

Today had been... a little eye-opening. Weirdly enough, not so much because of the talk with Rambley either. Though that had a good deal to do with it.

Ed still didn't know what happened here. In fact, he had more questions than answers.

Apparently, some incident happened that might've involved Lloyd attacking somebody and everyone left. And they left behind the lab-grown mascots which were part AI, part animal, and part... possible toy? There was now at least one mascot running around who would probably try to kill him, Salem the Skunk- not to mention a very disturbing Rambley who may or may not be out here somewhere. And on top of that he had agreed to break into an assumed mad scientist's lab and try to find a bunch

of Als to boot up and possibly get bodies for who may or may not be as friendly as Rambley was.

Come to think of it, Ed really bit off more than he could chew.

The thing was, he came here to investigate this park...

...and yet he was finding out that that wasn't what kept him sticking around. It was for Rambley. The mystery that drew him here took a backseat anytime he handed the wheel over to Rambley.

But maybe that wasn't such a bad thing? If he could get even one real smile from that little guy, then maybe it was worth all of it. It sure felt like it.

Ed headed inside with no doubts in his mind. He was in for the long haul. It had been a couple of days and operation 'Resurrect Rambley's Old Gang' was not yet a-go.

Ed had expected Rambley to be raring to go by the next day, but instead he was more interested in figuring out how they were going to get there and how they were going to do it. Trying to pinpoint as many exact details as he could. Which made a lot more sense in hindsight.

They had spent extensive time at Rambley's small dining room table with a park map laid out between them. Rambley sitting with one of his legs tucked underneath him, tapping a worn-down pencil on the map as he looked over it and slowly worked out what would be the best path to take. Occasionally his eyes unfocused so he could check the cameras and get a clearer picture.

At some point, Ed got bored and stopped looking at the map and just started watching Rambley. It was cute to watch him work. Watching his eyes flitter around, occasionally furrowing his brows or murmuring something before marking on the map, only to inevitably erase whatever he marked.

Ed got caught in the act when Rambley looked upwards and saw him watching. He got a sly grin.

“Whatcha looking at?”

“You,” Ed said honestly with his own little smile.

Rambley chuckled and swished his tail. By now Ed had picked up that he did that when he was happy or excited about something. Or weirdly enough, when he was annoyed. In this case, definitely not annoyed.

And seeing as Ed’s attention was on him, Rambley let him in on what he was thinking. Pointing out places on the map leading towards the labs and explaining them along the way.

“The quickest way to get to the labs would be to get down into the utility tunnels. BUT that’s if the tunnels are totally cleared out, which I am not sure. The cameras certainly aren’t working down there, and after Oceanic Odyssey...” Rambley gave a sympathetic hiss. “I’m going to call it now and say

the utility tunnels are too high of a risk. Which means we've got to cross the park up here. The straight through path would be the quickest, but that's where a lot of the damage settled. Sooo, I was thinking... go out towards the outer wall, cross through Berryburg Fairgrounds, loop back this way, scamper through Polly Pegleg's Pirate Bay, and then we should just be a hop, skip, and a jump away from the sphere! So, what do you think? You got that?"

"...No, but that's why you're the brains of this operation."

This time Rambley outright giggled. He spun his pencil in his fingers. "I try!"

So, there seemed to be a budding plan on the horizon. Ed was both nervous and excited to see what they would find. This lab would be the key to getting any answers Rambley hadn't provided and getting verification on any he had. It could be dangerous. It would probably be a little cool too. And maybe, just maybe, they could do this.

But they sure as heck weren't doing at night. So, when he was driving up the next evening, coming in right after the end of his stream, he planned on it being a quiet night before the two set out in the morning.

He brought some sparkling water and takeout- he noticed Rambley had been eyeing those old takeout containers- and was all set to settle in for another movie night. He even brought his laptop so they'd be able to watch it on a bigger screen than his phone.

It was going to be great. He drove down the road and pulled up outside of Indigo Park.

Only to find there was a car already parked there.

And Ed was filled with instant and immediate dread. Not because that there was a car there and possibly a stranger in the park, but because just from the view of that bumper he recognized whose car it was.

Oh, sweet mother of God, it was Laura.

Now, Ed should've predicted this happening from a mile away. Laura and he were very close, so he had been telling her about how he had been exploring Indigo Park. Except for one huge exception. That being an oversized raccoon who he had absolutely not told Laura anything about and had hoped that somehow the two wouldn't accidentally cross paths.

And since he had been telling her that he was regularly visiting and finding cool stuff, he had given her the perfect impression of the park to pique her interest. When she suggested coming, he hadn't said no. Ever. He always just sort of brushed it off.

"Maybe next time." "Eh, you wouldn't like it." "The whole place is falling in."

Like any feeble excuse would be able to detour someone as headstrong as Laura. So, she had apparently just drove up here to join him.

This was bad. And like most of the bad things in Ed's life, they were entirely of his own doing. Well done.

He pulled up behind her, shut off his car, and got out to go see her. Taking only his flashlight and leaving his pack and the rest of his stuff in his car.

Laura and Ed went way back. Childhood friends, stuck together in high school, watched her swap from cotton candy pink haired to blue, to both, to lavender, and currently back to a much tamer strawberry blond- which she always did when there was an impending family visit in the near future. Whether or not she'd cave and throw something in for Halloween was anyone's guess.

Ed loved Laura like a sister.

But seeing her sitting in her car made him instantly sick to his stomach.

Laura noticed him right away, probably tipped off by his headlights. She was probably on her phone waiting for him to show up. She waved and opened the driver's door as he walked up.

“Hey!” Laura got out of her car with a big smile.
“Surprise!”

“Heeeeyyy. What are you doing here?” Ed asked. He put on a smile to cover his dread.

“I thought it was about time I came down here and saw what you’ve been up to,” Laura said teasingly. She looked over the top of her car and off towards the entrance. “I didn’t think it was going to be so overgrown. The pictures online show all of these cleared out still. Crazy, right? They must’ve just never updated them.”

“Oh yeah. There’s a lot of things they didn’t update,” Ed agreed. “I hope you didn’t try to buy tickets online.”

“Nope. You?”

“Yes.”

She looked to him in surprise. “Wait, you did?”

“I wanted to see if I could.”

“...?”

“And I couldn’t.”

“That’s for the best. I don’t think you’d be getting that money back.”

“I have my ways,” Ed said fake-ominously and started to crack his knuckles.

She rolled her eyes, and even head for emphasis.

“Then lead the way, oh powerful one,” she said with a playful little smile.

And then Ed remembered what he was worrying about. He felt his throat start to dry out a little.

“...You sure?”

“Positive. I wore my boots and everything. I’m ready to go.”

Well, it looked like they were doing this. Which meant Ed had to think fast. He gave a nod as a non-answer and started to lead her towards the front gates.

It was right as they passed through the hole in the fence that he suddenly realized that the second they walked up onto the front gate, Rambley was going to show up on the screen. Who knew how much he could say before he noticed that Ed wasn't alone. Enough that Laura was going to know that something was up.

He had to do something, but what?... Warn Rambley, that's for sure. He thought fast and turned to Laura.

"Wait right here. I'm going to sneak up and make sure nobody's in that office over there." He pointed in the direction of the registration office.

"There's still people here?" Laura asked, brows raising.

“Uh, sorta. I found a guy in there the first night I came by.”

Funny enough, that was a bold-faced lie that was really the truth if he really thought about it.

“Just be careful!”

Ed nodded and turned away.

And just straight up booked it towards the door and hoped that Rambley wouldn't have a chance to pop up on the entrance screen.

In only a few seconds he came tearing into the registration office, almost running right into the doorway and having to wait until it lifted before ducking in. The screen on the wall turned on and revealed Rambley.

“Excuse me, Sir, but I think you must've took a wrong turn looking for the front gates,” Rambley joked.

Though then he noticed Ed breathing a little hard and with a familiar look of panic on his face. Rambley instantly shut the door behind him.

“Wait, did something happen? What’s going on?”

“Rambley, we’ve got a problem.”

Rambley got a look of dread. “Oh no. Was it Lloyd? Please tell me he’s not outside the gates!”

“You remember my friend Laura?”

“Yes?!”

“She’s right out there and she’s planning on coming in.” Rambley looked even more startled. “I didn’t bring her. She was waiting outside for me when I pulled up. I would never bring anyone by without asking you.”

“...Wait, your friend Laura?”

“Yes.”

The look of fear slowly dissipated off Rambley's face and was soon replaced with curiosity, and then a beaming bright smile.

"YOUR friend Laura is outside right now and she wants to come in?!" he asked excitedly.

This was not the reaction that Ed was expecting.
"Yes?"

"Oooh, that's FANTASTIC!" Rambley cheered. He clasped his hands beside his face excitedly. "I was wondering when I'd get to meet your other bestie! Well, what are you waiting for?! Bring her in!"

His tail was going crazy behind him. He was very excited- if the sparkles in his cartoon eyes didn't give it away.

And somehow that made Ed even more nervous. He must've shown it on his face.

“What’s wrong? Wait, did you think I was going to be upset? I guess I wasn’t exactly jumping up and down when we met, but that was different. I hadn’t seen anybody else in years and you were a stranger. But this is Laura- you’ve told me all about her! You’ve told me more about her than your mom.”

Rambley said that with complete innocence, and it still stung. But that was the last of his concerns.

“Yeah, but- the truth is, Rambley... I haven’t told her about you. At all,” Ed admitted. He rubbed the back of his neck. “She doesn’t know that, you know, you’re real. She doesn’t even know about you talking to me through the screen or anything. She just knows I’ve been visiting the park. I didn’t tell her what I was doing here.”

Rambley’s eyes widened momentarily, and then for a split second he looked a little disappointed.

“Oh...” But his smile returned quickly. “That’s okay! I’m sure we can bring her up to speed. And besides,

you said she visited Indigo Park when she was a kid too. Surely, she'll love me as much as you do!"

He had a point. Who wouldn't love a fluffy raccoon guy? Once she got over the shock, Laura would love Rambley!

...Maybe. Hopefully. If she freaked out, a very normal reaction, Rambley would probably take it the wrong way. After all, he hadn't taken that online criticism so well. Rambley had a soft heart, it could be bruised.

And he had an immune system that was seriously out-of-date. Laura was still going to nursing school, which meant she was around a lot of people regularly. And she was social, having a healthy friend group beyond Ed's tighter circle. Which meant she could have germs. Germs that she and he wouldn't notice, but poor Rambley might pick up. There was no way Laura would walk out of here without hugging Rambley.

And what if she told someone? Even accidentally, like saying she went to the park and not talking about Rambley. Someone could come by, and then Rambley would be more in danger. It was one thing if she said that some of the park's systems were working. Nobody would swing by to try out an interactive automated park attendant, but anyone could come looking for the living Rambley the Raccoon.

Ed couldn't keep Laura away and he couldn't seclude Rambley when he was so lonely, but they had to be careful.

He trusted Laura... but he had to protect his little buddy.

"Listen, umm..." Ed said quietly.

Rambley leaned an ear close to screen.

"Let's just... not tell her you're real yet. Let's pretend that you're just in the screen."

“What, why?”

“Because, uh... I just don’t know how she’s going to react.”

That was only part of the truth, but it certainly wasn’t a lie. Rambley looked a little disappointed though.

“Do you think she’ll be afraid of me?” Rambley asked worriedly.

“No! No, uh... Okay, how about this? We do like a test run. I bring her in and you do you-.”

“What I do best,” Rambley quietly added.

“-And maybe if this all goes well, maybe then we can let her see you. But only once we’re sure it’s going to be safe to do it.”

Rambley got a thoughtful look.

“You know, you’ve got a good point. I didn’t show myself to you for that exact reason. I mean, showing

myself to you was sort of an accident anyways. BUT if she gets to know me then maybe the shock won't be so bad! Excellent plan, Rangler!"

At least he was on-board. Maybe they could really pull this off. Even if Ed was starting to feel a little bad about it...

"Soo, what'cha waiting for? Unless you need a minute. I won't open the gate without you out there," Rambley assured him. He quickly reigned in his excitement for Ed's sake. "In fact, if you really want... I don't have to open the gate at all!"

Rambley was giving him an out. That's what solidified for Ed that he had to suck it up and do this. For him, for Laura, and for himself because there was no way he could handle a double-life.

"I'm good. I'm going to go get her and bring in."

"I'll be ready!"

With that, Ed turned and headed back out, and then walked back to Laura.

“Coast is clear,” he said.

“Good, because that was the least stealthy thing I’ve ever seen,” Laura said. Still looking pretty confused by him running off.

Ed made no effort to defend himself. He just beckoned with a, “Let’s go,” and they headed up towards the still-closed gate.

Laura noticed the doors still shut as they walked up. “So, how do we get insi-?”

She was cut off by a cheery voice and a friendly raccoon popping up on the screen to her left.

“HI THERE, and welcome to Indigo Park! The world’s most innovative and engaging family fun experience!” Rambley chirped happily.

She jumped and looked over wide-eyed, which got a snort out of Ed, while Rambley kept up his spiel.

“Jump into the world of your favorite characters- Mollie Macaw, Finely the Sea Serpent, and me! I’m Rambley, Rambley the Raccoon, and it’s my job to make sure your experience here at Indigo Park is the most fun it can be! Why don’t you come on inside, and we’ll get started on your Indigo Adventure!”

He gestured towards the gate doors which began to open. Ed noticed he skipped the registration but, knowing Rambley, he probably had already done it with the information Ed had given him.

All the while, Laura was already starting to fangirl. All at once all the old memories she had forgotten rushed back.

“Oh wow. Oh my gosh!” Laura’s face brightened. She shook Ed’s arm excitedly. “I can’t believe it’s still working! Oh my God, I remember this!!” she gushed.

“Really?! That’s great! What’s your last name? I might be able to find any pictures you had taken at the park!” Rambley said.

There was a long pause as Laura processed what just happened. That Rambley had heard her and responded.

Her look of joy was replaced with one of confusion, and then shock.

“Wait-.”

“He’s-,” Ed started, cut off at the same time. She looked to him, and he gave a sort of shrug. “He’s like an interactive thing, remember?”

She only sort of remembered but didn’t remember him answering questions or actually understanding what you were saying. Then again, it was a crowded park, and they were kids when they last came here together. They wouldn’t have thought deeply about a cartoon raccoon welcoming them to the park.

Rambley's frozen and silent depiction on the screen tipped off that he too noticed the reaction. But just as quickly he tried to continue like normal, gesturing his hands towards the door.

"Come on in! And welcome to Indigo Park!"

Ed started inside. Laura kept up but pointed to the screen and looked at him questioningly. He just smiled like he knew something she didn't.

She looked around in awe at the overgrown entranceway. It was a far cry from how she remembered it looking. Was this always grass?

These were all things Ed considered too, but now he was much more acquainted with it.

"This way," he directed. He led her to the Critter Corner. The door had been left open so he could just walk right in.

The screen above the turnstiles turned on and revealed Rambley yet again.

“Now before you can join the fun, let’s stop by the- Oh, that’s where you’re going. Good job!” Rambley complimented.

Ed looked for Laura’s reaction as they entered the Critter Corner and sure enough, her eyes lit up.

“Oh, wow! I thought this would’ve been cleaned out. Why haven’t you taken this stuff home or something?”

“Eh, I grabbed a couple. Any more would’ve felt like stealing.”

“I don’t think it counts as stealing when it’s been abandoned for years. It’s just going to get moldy if it sits here.”

Ed’s brows raised as Laura immediately started grabbing for whatever she could see. Snatching up a bunch of the abandoned, dusty plushies off the floor.

He was alerted to a mechanical squeak and looked over to see the screen on an arm lifting from its prone position, Rambley now appearing on it. His eyes went wide as he saw the amount of shoplifting Laura was prepared to partake in.

“Whoa, whoa! I admire the enthusiasm, but before you do that, why don’t you step right up over here and get your very own Critter Cuff! The best part is that it’s totally free!” Rambley said.

This caught Laura’s attention- the sudden voice appearing in the room more than anything- and she shot up like a deer in headlights, much to Ed’s continued amusement.

She headed over to the counter and the tube, where a lift lowered and revealed a Critter Cuff that looked practically identical to Ed’s own. She started to set down her armful of stuff when Ed stopped here.

“I’ve got it.” He grabbed the Critter Cuff and helped put it on her wrist while Rambley watched on.

Rambley silently 'aww'd' at the moment. Ed was such a good friend! What a thoughtful gesture!

Though was it just his imagination or did Ed's hand linger on her arm? Rambley squinted but couldn't tell. Come to think of it, Ed kinda did that on impulse. Almost like he was used to doing little things like this for her.

Was there something Ed wasn't telling him? Were they reaaaally JUST friends? Nah, there was no way Ed would hide something as big as that!

...But then again, he didn't tell Laura about him at all. If he could hide something as big as the real Rambley the Raccoon, he could hide something as big as this.

Unless he didn't know. What if they were those kind of 'just friends' who wouldn't be just friends much longer? Ed did talk about Laura a lot, and he did get sort of flustered earlier. Maybe that's why he was flustered, not just because of the whole park thing but because he had someone he wanted to impress

and got embarrassed? Was he afraid Rambley would scare Laura away for good? Is that why he asked him to stay hidden?

Ed noticed the screen slowly moving in closer and closer and looked up. The screen, and Rambley himself, abruptly jumped back with a start.

“Erm- Indigo Park’s very own Critter Cuff! This nifty little gadget will give you access to all the rides, save your scores on any arcade machines in the park, works as a pedometer, heart monitor, mood ring, and even actively searches for discounts at any of the major vendors in the park! You can say it really opens doors,” Rambley said with a wink.

Ed smiled at their little inside joke.

“And speaking of major discounts, that applies to any Indigo Park brand merchandise too! When it comes to our character-styled plush toys, we are technically closed so they are technically up for grabs, but they are very rare and totally exclusive to Indigo Park! Every piece is a one-of-a-kind original

that you won't find anywhere else! Unless you look at resales online, but those are crazy expensive and probably smelly musty from being cooped up in a box or on a shelf."

It didn't take a genius to see what Rambley was angling at. Ed suddenly realized his mistake in paying for that shirt. He accidentally gave Rambley his first taste of having his own money, and it tasted like pizza.

Ah well, if he could make his two best friends happy.

"Put it on my tab," he said.

He hoped Rambley got the meaning.

"Your what?... Oh, your TAB! We can do that, but are you sure?" Rambley asked.

Laura was looking at Rambley's screen funny. No longer with surprise but instead with a squint of her own and slightly pursed lips, like she had just thought of something. But then snapped out of it.

“There’s no way I’m making you pay for a bunch of toys. I’ve got it.”

She pulled off her tan crossbody bag and began to dig inside, getting out a colorful wallet and looking through it. She saw a bunch of small bills and not much else.

“...” She looked up at Rambley. “You don’t take credit cards, do you?”

“Unfortunately due to the technical situation in the park the card reader’s currently down,” Rambley said with an apologetic smile.

There was a long pause before Laura gave Ed her own apologetic smile.

“I’ll pay you back?”

He gave her a thumbs up.

“Thanks. I owe you big.”

Laura then went right back to the stands to search through them, eventually making her way to the keychains. She gasped and snatched up a little Salem keyring.

Rambley's movable screen leaned in behind Ed.

"Why don'tcha just write me a blank check?" He looked unnecessarily smug.

These were his two best friends.

They left the gift shop a little after that, and Laura ran back to her car to toss her new stuff inside. This gave Ed and Rambley a moment alone.

"Gosh, she really likes Indigo Park! Or at least, she likes our plushies. I don't blame her, I'm pretty soft on them myself," Rambley said. Then he hesitated, and quietly murmured, "She's not going to resell them online, is she?"

"No. Those are going straight onto her bed."

“Hopefully they go straight to a dry-cleaner first,” Rambley joked.

This got a chuckle out of Ed and a grin out of Rambley.

“This is going a lot better than I thought,” Ed admitted.

“You really think so? I thought she was finally warming up to me!” Rambley said excitedly.

“Seems like.”

“So, should we...?” Rambley fiddled with his hands.
“Think about maybe...?”

“Uh... Not yet. Not just yet, okay?”

“Oh, okay! Just double checking.”

Honestly, Rambley agreed. She only just stopped giving him those looks like she thought he

was going to leap out and pounce on her. It was probably too soon to push more onto her.

“So, I was wondering. About this friendship of yours- Oh, here she comes!”

Laura came bounding back up and the tour continued, with them finally heading to the turnstile and arriving at the statue of Issac Indigo, the creator of the park and cartoons, and Rambley himself. An eerie statue that Ed swore was always looking at him no matter what angle he was standing at.

“Oh wow...” Laura said. Then she looked over and saw the collapsed entrance to Rambley’s Railroad. “Oh WOW, what happened over there?!”

“It’s a long story... Or actually it’s a pretty short story. I walked through and the whole thing came down behind me,” Ed admitted.

“Yikes!”

“Heh, umm, a quick disclaimer but the park is currently under... major renovations. Be sure to watch your step and stick close to your buddy. And absolutely, positively, do NOT eat or drink any Indigo Park products unless approved by yours truly,” Rambley said. His voice coming from the screen behind them.

“Is that where you’ve been going through?” Laura asked. Her voice holding a tinge of worry as she noticed the cleared rubble towards the top.

“Yup, but it’s not as bad as it looks. Don’t worry, I’ve been through there dozens of times. Just watch your step and don’t go too fast.”

Rambley watched through a distant camera as Ed climbed up first and then Laura followed. She had a little trouble, so Ed offered her a hand and easily helped pull her up.

Good thing Eddie was there! She’d probably still be stuck at the gift shop if he wasn’t.

But Rambley wasn't going to get left behind that easy. He hopped to the screen in the tunnel, right outside of his railroad.

"Well, come on, Slowpokes!" he called. "Better start chugging along because this party train's about to leave the station!"

"Train?" Laura asked. "Wait, the train that goes around the park?"

"No. That train." Ed pointed to the Rambley Railroad poster.

"That's right, Rambley's Railroad! You'll be reacquainted with all my friends and other miscellaneous characters!" Rambley called.

"It still works?" she said. Ed nodded. "Oh, heck yeah! Let's go check it out!"

Rambley was thrilled by that enthusiasm. And since Laura walked the normal way around, Ed didn't spoil

the experience by jumping the dividers. Which he was definitely planning on doing.

“Now I might be a little biased, but I believe this is the best ride in the whole park! Even if it’s on the slower side. But you’re never too old to enjoy a leisurely train ride!” Rambley said. His image hopping from little screen to little screen. “Do you know why Rambley the Raccoon loves Rambley’s Railroad?”

“Because he loves trains?” Laura finished.

“Oh. Y-Yeah, that’s right!”

Either she remembered or that was a very good guess.

Laura looked back over her shoulder at Ed and sent him a smile that Rambley couldn’t see. He couldn’t tell if it was an excited ‘I remembered!’ smile or if she was making fun of him. Though it did take the fun out of the punchline when he didn’t get to say it.

Though at least she pointed out his statue as they passed, which perked him up a little. He still stayed quiet until they made it to the train to board.

“All aboard the Rambley Express! We have planned stops in Rambley Canyon, Macaw Mountains, Finley’s Ocean, and the Main Stage theater with a final stop at Indigo Park!” Rambley announced.

Ed stepped into the cart and offered a hand to help Laura in- Yeesh, did she always need help?

Wait, no. That was no way to think about a guest! Let alone Ed’s best friend- other than him- so he shook those thoughts away. Laura liked Indigo Park, and him! And that’s all that mattered.

...They squeezed onto the same side too. He didn’t remember Ed trying that with him.

The train started moving and they rolled out of the station and into the, well, other station so conductor Rambley could board and be back with his buddies and join the fun. He even got an ‘aww’ out of Laura.

No doubt for his spiffy conductor hat- he made a metal note to find his conductor hat when he got home.

Except the ride through Rambley's Railroad was not entirely what Rambley expected. He expected their eyes to be on him. For both of them to be as engaged as Ed usually was, but that wasn't the case.

Laura and Ed spent a lot of it reminiscing and talking, briefly stopping when the segments would start but then going back to these discussions of a park from long ago.

"Remember that kid with the Finley hat who split, and they found him like right over there, hiding behind some props?"

"No, when did that happen?"

"When that mom was running around saying someone kidnapped her son and they were checking purses-."

“Wait, yes! I remember that. I can’t believe they actually called the cops.”

“They should’ve called a priest. That was a devil child.”

“Aww, he was just a kid.”

“Devil child!”

They were laughing and carrying on about things that would’ve probably been funny if Rambley had been there, but he wasn’t. He couldn’t even remember the incident in question even though he was likely still sitting in a screen when it did.

Even now he was sitting right here in the screen, and they barely noticed him!

Well, that was okay. This ride might’ve been about him and his friends, but this whole visit was about sharing Indigo Park with his childhood friend! Who was Rambley to butt in? Not Rambley! Even though

he sort of just assumed that he would be getting two friends, not watching two friends.

Well, until they reached the Salem section and remembering the state it was in, Rambley shut off the lines and ran the train straight through there. No stops, no mess, no looks of disappointment at a broken ride.

It didn't get past Laura though. "Wasn't there a part with Salem?" she asked.

"It, uh... It's under renovations."

"Oh." Laura was disappointed, but then suddenly had an idea. "Hey, we should go check out Salem's Swamp! There's got to be some merch left there."

"I don't know, it's pretty far..." Ed said unsurely.

He looked to Rambley who put on a big smile, and proceeded to hold that smile through the entire Lloyd introduction as it was the first time Ed and Laura were actually paying real attention to him.

“Oh, hey Lloyd!”

“Do not shame me with that commonfolk name! I am the-.”

“Yeah, okay, whatever,” Rambley said through tight teeth as the train zoomed out of the station.

Laura choked, actually choked on a laugh. And it was in that second that suddenly Rambley’s smile became real. He got a laugh! And now all eyes were back on him again! It felt good to be back in the spotlight.

But soon they had to disembark. The train stopped in the station, and he hopped himself over onto the screens inside of the gift shop.

“What did you think? Was it everything you remembered?” Rambley asked.

“Oh yeah, it was great,” Laura said. “Thanks for letting us ride.”

“No problem! And hey, since you’re here, why don’t you pick out a souvenir photo? My treat!”

Rambley switched the display to show the pictures taken during the ride and very quickly looked through them himself and deflated a little.

Funny how the pictures turned out so good when they were too distracted to even pose for them. Him and Ed had to ride twice just to get a good one. They picked one out and Rambley sent it to process.

He got even more glum when Laura showed only a few seconds of interest in the merch selection. Still looking for Salem stuff. If she only knew how much of a pain in the neck they were! Sure, she had gotten a Rambley plushy earlier, but why not two? Why not a shirt? Why not a second look at the wearable ears?

Why did it bother him so much?

And... why didn’t Ed notice that it did?

But Rambley kept it to himself and when Ed and Laura got their snapshot, with Laura laughing at how goofy it looked and Ed smiling, it made him feel like he wasn't there at all.

Ed at least waved when he popped back up on the screens and as they made their way out of the gift shop.

Laura reacted to the sight of main street very much as Ed had, with a silent awe as she looked around at the once-magical place and how broken it had become. Alongside the bits of life still left in it; the spiraling clock, the lights of the distant Ferris Wheel, and the fountain now cleaner than it had been in years- not that she was aware.

“Look at this place. Look at the Ferris Wheel! That’s so pretty!” Laura pointed out. “It’s a shame everything else has sort of... gone to crap,” she said sadly.

Rambley’s ear twitched with irritation.

“There’s still some charm here. You’ve just got to look beyond this and look at... look at the fountain. The fountain looks good,” Ed offered.

“The fountain looks shockingly good.”

“Cleaned it out myself,” Ed said proudly.

Laura seemed surprised. “What, really?” He nodded sincerely. “So, wait. You’ve been coming down here and cleaning the place up?”

“That’s right.”

“Oh my God, Ed, I love you to death, but you’re way in over your head. But the fountain looks great,” Laura said. Though her smile indicated that she wasn’t against the idea, she even looked a little interested herself. “Did you do this all by yourself or did Rambley pitch in?”

Ed had no idea what she was getting at with that, but it didn’t sound like anything good.

Well, two could play at that game.

“Oh yeah, he supplied the stuff. He even scrubbed the statue himself. That little guy can really work,” Ed ‘joked’.

Laura looked a little too amused. Ed changed the subject.

“So, where to? There’s Jetstream Junction.”

Laura didn’t even need to think about it. “Let’s go see if we can get to Salem’s Swamp!”

“NO DON’T!”

Ed and Laura’s head both snapped to a cry from an information kiosk practically halfway across the square on the side of the road. They headed over to find Rambley on the screen with a downright terrified look on his face. One Ed hadn’t seen since Mollie was on his heels.

With the knowledge that there was a Salem mascot running around somewhere out there, Ed understood why.

Rambley got a very nervous toothy grin, little sweat drops appearing on his forehead.

“S-Spoiled Swamp is closed for repairs! Sorry for the inconvenience.”

To Laura’s credit, she didn’t show her disappointment even though he knew she was. Instead, she smiled sweetly and played along.

“That’s okay, Little Guy. What do you think we should do?”

“Wellll, we have Mollie’s Landing Pad, Alice’s Teacups...!”

Well, that was sort of it unless they wanted to risk the Ferris Wheel.

“There’s a little arcade cabinet over in Jetstream Junction,” Ed offered, trying to help.

Oh no, that was just sad. They were currently down to three (mostly) functioning rides and a jungle gym. That was a really bad look.

Ed could see the edge of panic crossing Rambley’s cartoonish expression. It really wasn’t hard to see when there were clearly animated sweat drops, and his eyes were darting around a little too fast. His irises flicking back and forth between swirling like they were loading and looking normal. It looked like he needed more help.

“Or, hey, we could head over to that, uh...” Ed snapped his fingers a few times. “Fair? You know that place with the little water park. That’s not too far. Might be worth seeing.”

Laura looked on-board immediately. No wonder either, the two had played around there for hours. If anywhere in Indigo Park would be revisiting a piece of their childhood, it would be there.

It was a great idea!... So, why did Rambley get yet another look of shock. He was no longer sweating bullets, but he didn't seem as relieved as Ed thought he would be.

"I don't know. You would have to walk a long way to get around all of the, uh... active renovations."

"I'm fine with a walk!" Laura volunteered.

"It'll be okay. We'll be careful, and we've got these if anything comes up," Ed assured, holding up his Critter Cuff.

"But..." Rambley seemed torn before putting on a smile "Well, if you two insist! Just keep in mind that it might not look quite as whimsical as you might remember it."

"It'll match the tunnel," Laura joked.

Ed playfully nudged her. Rambley smiled tightly.

“Which way?”

“Just past the turn to the Ferris Wheel, then you take a left and keep going until you reach the mounted park map. That will lead the way!”

Rambley gestured off towards the street, but there was an odd look in his eye. He was looking off towards the road and back quickly, back and forth, and almost seemed to be looking directly at Ed despite his flat cartoonish design.

Ed couldn't tell if he was nervous or if he was signaling him. Either way he probably needed to stop and clear that up, so he took a few steps onto the street with Laura before stopping.

“Hold on, I'm going to retie my shoe,” Ed said. He then took a few steps back to the kiosk and rested his foot on it as he did just that. He kept his head down and close to the kiosk. “What's up?” he whispered.

“Eddie, what are you doing?” Rambley whispered back.

“Tying my shoe.”

“Don’t be cute. You know what I mean. Going to Berryburg Fairgrounds.”

“I know it’s a little off the beaten path, but I’ve got to scout anyway.”

“WE were supposed to scout,” Rambley huffed.

“We will. We still are. You’re going to be there with us, right?”

He stole a look up to see Rambley’s unamused pout.

“Come on. It’s not like it’s the first time I’ve seen it,” Ed said. “And it would make Laura happy.”

Rambley sighed. “Fine...” He wasn’t happy about this, but he couldn’t argue with Ed. Even if he really wanted to.

Ed gave him an appreciative smile. “Thanks. We’ll explore it together tomorrow, okay?”

“Sure.”

Rambley didn’t sound thrilled, but there wasn’t much Ed could do but make it up to him later. Which he planned on doing. That and keep himself out of trouble for his sake.

Laura was looking at him with a quirked brow when he returned but didn’t ask and they headed off together.

Rambley watched them go through the cameras. With that he had been officially left behind, at least until they got to the next screen for him to attach to.

He slouched his head into his hands with a sigh. Well, this evening wasn’t going how he planned. Here he was hoping he was going to get two Eddies and instead he got a second Lloyd!

...No, that wasn't fair. Laura wasn't even an eighth as spotlight-sucking as Lloyd was.

But now here they were wandering off to a section of the park with barely any working cameras just because it was the only way to keep them on this side of the park! It didn't take the mind of a supercomputer to see that this was going to go badly.

Yet he still wished he was the one who was going. Turns out living behind a screen wasn't as fun as the real thing. Ed didn't remember the walk to Berryburg. Especially not now when the greenery lining the path had largely grown over top of it, but they pressed on. Alone, unfortunately, as once they left main street for the smaller pathing they had lost contact with Rambley as there weren't any available screens.

Ed hoped they were still in his sight though. Now he wasn't sure if the Critter Cuffs worked on their own, and with greenery this dense anything could suddenly leap out.

Soon the overgrown path opened and led right up to a large wooden sign that had been weatherworn over the years. It read: "Welcome to the Berryburg Fairgrounds!" in large, colorful, engraved letters. Though the paint had faded significantly. If not for the molding, it would've been a little hard to make it out.

The information kiosk beside the sign lit with Rambley's visage. Though he was a little more staticky and harder to see.

"W-Welcome to Berrrryburg Fairgrounds! Wal-l-lk into a real-life cartoon wherrre you can meet all your fav-avorite charrecterssss!... D-Does my voice sound echo-y orrrr is it just me?"

"You're glitching a little."

"Wellll that expl-explains it," Rambley said with disappointed pout. Though he quickly put on a cheesy smile. "Evennn if you can't hearrrr me l-l I can see you. So, it's lik-ke I'm therrrre with you evennn

when you can't see me!" He waved with a slightly sad look to his eyes. "Havvve fun!"

"Without you? No way."

This got a little chuckle out of the raccoon before the kiosk turned off.

Oh yeah, Rambley wasn't happy about this arrangement. He was going to have to make it up to him later.

"So, I've got to ask," Laura started. She was trying to suppress a smile. "Have you been sneaking down here just to hang out with a talking raccoon?"

If only she knew.

"Yes," he said.

"I can believe it," she teased.

They continued walking into the park section proper.

Upon seeing Berryburg, Ed was hit with a wave of nostalgia. The little gift shops that looked like cottages- similar to the ones in the square around Rambley's house, but a little quainter. The Topsy-Turvy Tree-Fall coaster, which was a rather small coaster that went through a few short ups and downs and turns before returning right where it started.

They even passed by a park they had played at. One of those parks with slides but also little fountains shooting up from the ground that little kids could run and jump through. Though unlike the main fountain, these ones weren't currently spewing. There was a plastic Finley statue sticking out of the ground with little bumps of its body sticking up behind it.

It was everything Ed could remember, but there was something especially sad about it.

The rest of the park was broken, but this was the one part that looked truly abandoned. All the once-colorful paint and plastic had faded and only a

few of the old-timey looking streetlamps still worked, casting an eerie yellow hue that made everything feel surreal and dream-like.

“Let’s go in there,” Laura said.

She pointed to a big circus tent looking building. Except it wasn’t a circus tent at all but another gift shop. The biggest one in Berryburg Fairground and bigger than any they had passed so far.

Ed agreed and they headed inside. The building still had its roof up, but the streamers and mounted squirrel characters on tightropes and trapeze had fallen into a heap in the center of the store. Somehow being heavy enough to take out the central display. Other than that, there was a ton of merch still left. Plenty of it on the floor, abandoned, forgotten, and comprised of characters Ed totally forgot about.

Laura rushed off to look for more Salem stuff while Ed browsed over by the candy and trinket twenty-five cent machines. He got out his wallet and

popped in a dollar's worth and turned the crank to get a large Rambley sticker. It would probably look good somewhere around his desk.

But it was then that he noticed a few arcade machines as well. One of them stood out.

It was a teal arcade cabinet, but it said 'Rambley Rush' above the screen. So, was it the same game? A quick look at the side showed a cartoonish depiction of Rambley and Finley on it, so maybe it wasn't.

"Still no Salem stuff! Someone must've just grabbed it all up right after the park closed," Laura lamented. She then noticed what had caught Ed's attention. "What's that?"

"Rambley Rush. It's like the one I found over at Jetstream Junction, but it looks like this is a different version," he said.

Like the other game it had been set to some sort of free play mode, so Ed pressed the button to start.

Laura came over to watch as the screen came to life.

The game started on what looked to be a beach-like coast with rocky cliffs beside it. Rambley was standing on darkened path down the sand while water lapped on the beach between him and the screen.

“Hmm. Looks like that slimy purple gunk in the water is coming from the bay! I hope Finley’s okay...”

The pixelated Rambley was sent running across the beach and hopping across stones and driftwood platforms. There were a few purple shadow crab enemies that he had to hop on, but not when their claws were open. He crossed sand, went through a cave, and soon was platforming over open water until eventually he came to three floating platforms.

That was when the game paused for a cutscene. Finley’s pixelated head appeared out of the water past the last platform.

“Finley, are you okay? What’s this gross purple stuff in the water?” Rambley asked.

“Hi Rambley. I don’t know. Maybe it’s an oil slick? I feel kind of sick...” Finley said.

Suddenly Finley’s head flopped on the water like he had passed out.

“FINLEY!?!?”

Funky music kicked in as none other than Salem hopped out from behind the cliff and landed on the floating platform closest to Finley.

“Well, well, well. Look who finally showed up! You took your sweet time,” they said.

“Salem!? Did you poison the water!?”

“Poison it? I made it better! One sip’a this water will turn any spineless worm into a real mean green monster!”

“Why would anybody want that?!”

“Why don’t you see for yourself!”

Finley’s colors flickered until he turned a dark purple with orange-yellow eyes. Just like what happened to Mollie in the other arcade cabinet.

“Oh no, Finley!”

“No more coopin’ up in his shell for this little yellow belly!”

Salem gave a cackle of “AH HA HA” and sprung off the platform and off the screen.

Then the boss fight began. Finley would dip under the water and then there’d be bubbling under one of the platforms. Then Finley would suddenly pop up under it, shooting it into the air and leaving him exposed for a quick jump on the head. The first hop Ed almost didn’t make it back to the safety of the next platform, but after that he easily took out the boss.

Finley then tilted his head upwards like he was roaring, and globs of purple began to spurt out and rain down. Ed was thankfully on the opposite side and managed to land one last hop.

Almost instantly the screen began to grow crunchy and glitch out just like last night. The music devolving into something distorted.

But this time the static lasted longer, and Ed heard something through it. It sounded like mumbling. He leaned in closely and listened.

“I don’t understand don’t understand don’t understand I can’t get in I don’t know why I don’t know where they went in the cages in the basement in my head hurts.”

It sounded like Rambley.

But he sounded strange. He sounded crackly and glitchy, but he also seemed confused. He heard something about ‘where they went’, was Rambley

looking for them and somehow the machine transmitted his thoughts?

“Did you hear that?” Ed asked.

“I did. What was that?”

“I don’t know. It sounded like Rambley but...”

“...Play it again. We’ll see if we can hear it next time,” Laura suggested. She pressed the second player start button and they started over again.

Ed still played as Rambley while Laura played as a red Rambley with a purple bandana. They played through the level like normal until they were almost at the end.

At that point while coordinating jumps, Laura missed a stone and fell into the water and disappeared. They assumed that she would pop back up or that the machine would say her game was over, but neither happened. Ed got a few hops ahead before they really noticed.

“Why am I not respawning?” Laura said.

Ed looked around at the screen. “I don’t know. Maybe you’re still alive out of bounds?”

“I guess.”

“Huh...” Ed jumped down into the water after her.

But surprisingly it wasn’t just an endless pit. The camera followed Rambley deep into the cloudy water before ending up at the bottom. He ran back and met up with the red Rambley, but also saw something else on the edge of the screen.

“What’s that?” Laura said.

Ed moved closer and a large cage came into view. Finely’s pixelated model, which looked like his normal design instead of just a head, was crunched up inside of the cage. Ed hopped on top of it and the game started to glitch like it did when he had

finished the Finley boss fight. Then the game reset to its normal screen.

Something about the scene was especially eerie for Ed. He felt a chill over his shoulders, like he just saw something he wasn't supposed to.

"That was weird," Laura voiced. "Why a cage?"

"Rambley said the mascots were kept in cages," Ed said.

"You've totally just been coming down here to talk to Rambley, haven't you?"

"Laura."

"I'm kidding. Just... this is weird. This is really weird. Who'd program an arcade game with like ARG mechanics in it?"

"No clue..." Ed sighed and tapped his fingers on the cabinet. "One more go?"

“Sure.”

They went through a third and final time, making it to the end and taking on Finley. During which Ed ended up falling off a platform and not respawning, leaving Laura to finish up the boss fight. Upon which the game froze again, but this time, even as they leaned in and strained, neither of them could hear any muttering. Whatever Ed had heard was a one-time thing.

“Okay, that whole thing was pretty weird,” Laura admitted. “Was the other game like this?”

“It was. Except for that whispering at the end. It did that same glitch out and shut down thing.”

“I guess it makes sense. I’m shocked they’re still running without regular maintenance.”

Ed sighed. He was pretty creeped out now. Not creeped out to leave the park, but enough that if Laura wasn’t here, he’d be hightailing it back to the treehouse. He turned away from the machine.

And caught a glimpse of a shadow at the edge of the entranceway. It moved before he could even process it, like a blip in his vision. His heart clenched as he stared.

“Maybe one of the other ones works. What’s wrong?” Laura asked.

“I think I saw something,” Ed said lowly.

Laura looked over at the doorway too, but it was long gone by now. But he knew something had been there.

Something had been watching them, just like Mollie had. But it wasn’t her. It was something a lot faster. Something a lot quieter.

...Had it been Rambley? He really hoped it was Rambley. Maybe that’s why they picked up his interference over the machine, because he was nearby. Maybe that was some sort of mental transmission from Rambley.

If that was the case though, then that was concerning in a whole different way. Either way he really needed to talk with Rambley, he had the eye on the cameras. And since he couldn't waltz up to him, or chase after him, he would have to find a screen.

"Let's get out of here..."

Laura wasn't going to argue with that tone.

Ed led the way back out the entrance. He waved a hand for Laura to stay back and crept out first, trying to get a good look around the corners as he did.

The air smelled like bad perfume or cologne. Like the stuff that smelled too strong no matter the amount. It made him cough a little, but he had to smother it so he could hear if anything was nearby.

Whatever it was, Rambley or not, it was gone.

Ed glanced around to see if there were any screens nearby. Since none had suddenly appeared since he walked past the first time, it looked like he was going back to the kiosk.

“I’m going to check in with Rambley. Make sure that wasn’t him.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Laura stuck close enough by checking out an old concession stand while Ed jogged back to the kiosk. The screen turned on as he came around the corner of it.

“Hey, Eddie! Wherrre’s Laurra?” Rambley asked.

“Right over there. Are you okay?”

“Me?”

“Yeah. I was playing some Rambley Rush over there and I heard your voice. You sounded sort of confused and you were saying things like how you

didn't understand, and you couldn't get in?" Ed explained.

Rambley's eyes widened in surprise, but then he looked thoughtful. "Wait, wait. You-ou said you werrre playing Rammmbley R-Rush? Arrre you sure it-t wasn't my voice coming frrrom the arrrcade cabinet?"

"No. You have sort of a, like a, it's kind of like a garbled Pet Passing voice in the game. This sounded a lot like you, and it was sort of whispered out of the back of the machine."

"That's... That's verrry crreeepy, Eddie." Rambley got an uneasy smile. "Say, maybe you two should starrrt coming back this way."

Ed thought that was a pretty good idea. He nodded and headed off to get Laura. She was still poking around the stand.

Ed leaned into the window. "Hey, what do you think about heading back towards main street?"

Laura, crouched down poking through some boxes, looked up in surprise.

“But we just got here!”

“I know but I’m getting a bad vibe.”

Laura almost protested but before she could she caught Ed looking over his shoulder again. Not a casual look either, he was looking nervous. That game must’ve really creeped him out.

Despite how much she wanted to explore, Ed came first.

“Okay. We can head back,” Laura agreed. She then added more lightly, “But there better be something fun back there.”

“There’s the old candy confectionary-.”

“Say no more. Take me to the candy.”

“Okay but just for the record, it might be a little moldy.”

“Candy’s too magical to go moldy.”

They returned to main street, walking the lengthy path all the way back. All the while Ed kept a careful eye out and kept looking over his shoulder. Whatever it was had truly seemed to disappear.

Though that weird perfume smell lingered until they were squarely back on the street.

For the next while they explored the area around the confectionary. The teacups were still functional, and Ed took a literal spin on them. Laura passed for understandable reasons. Instead choosing to watch at a safe distance in case he derailed.

Everything was quiet and somber. Interesting but empty. Especially with Rambley being unusually quiet. He popped up now and again on nearby kiosks or screens, but seemed a little eager to talk. Sometimes Ed caught him putting on a smile.

It made Ed wonder if Rambley was worried about something or if he was just distracted by, let's say, wandering around the park. Ed didn't catch anymore glimpses of shadows but he could've believed it.

But Laura wasn't equipped to stay as late as Ed had been and soon, they started to make their way back down the street towards the fountain.

“-I'm just saying I think it's sweet that you got all sentimental about this place. I'm not teasing you,” Laura said with a tone that sounded suspiciously like teasing.

“Uh huh.”

“No, I mean it. I get it! This is really cool. It's been like a whole blast to the past,” Laura said. “...I miss it, you know? Not even just the park, but just being a kid. Getting to come to a place like this and have it just be this incredible, life-changing experience.”

He understood. He might've not specifically wanted to be a kid again, but he wished some things could've gone back to how they were. The park included. He had some of his best memories here.

"What happened to this place?" Laura asked.

"I don't know. There was some sort of accident, and they closed the doors and never opened them again. But what happened and why it happened? That's what I'm trying to figure out," Ed said.

"No, I mean what happened? It looks like a bomb was dropped on it!"

"Oh, that. I think it might've been that earthquake a couple of years ago. Or the tunnels under the park fell in."

"There's no tunnels under the park," Laura said with an amused scoff.

“I know for a fact there are,” Ed said seriously. “And they lead right up to the cryochamber underneath the park where they keep Isaac Indigo’s head.”

Laura blew him off again, mildly amused, and looked around. She took in the sight of the broken buildings and crumbling facades and looked a little sad, her and it both did.

But then her face suddenly brightened. He knew that look; she had an idea.

“You know what?”

Laura turned to Ed with an excited smile.

“This place would be great for a Halloween Party! We could invite some people over and just, you know, chill out!”

Ed looked at her like she had grown two heads.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Well, let’s ask Rambley,” Laura suggested.

That seemed like an even worse idea. Rambley might’ve been excited to meet Laura, but a bunch of strangers running around his park? There’s no way he’d be on board.

Yet Laura was striding for the kiosk. Ed was quick to catch up.

“We were just talking about a bomb getting dropped here. That’s not exactly a safe place to party,” Ed rationalized.

“But safe enough for you to hang out every night?” Laura joked. Before she could tap on the kiosk screen, it turned on and revealed Rambley yet again. “Rambley, would it be okay if we threw a Halloween Party here?”

Ed could see how blindsided Rambley was just by the shocked look on his face.

“You want to throw a party here, in the park? A Halloween Party?” Rambley squeaked.

“Right! Just, like, around the fountain, maybe in the café-.”

“Wait, wait. You mean inviting people here to the park for a party? But... who would you invite? How could you even celebrate when the park’s not exactly... not entirely open for business?”

“That’s okay! I was thinking we’d invite some of our friends and bring them by. Then we’d just hang out, listen to music and stuff. We could all come in costumes and bring a bunch of candy, have a little hootenanny or whatever they used to call it.”

“A hootenanny,” Ed agreed.

“Wise ol’ Owl’s Hootenanny,” Rambley clarified.

“That except over there. We could just bring maybe a fold-out table and some-.”

She continued explaining her ideas all while Rambley watched with an uneasy look.

A party? Not an official Indigo Park Purple Pumpkin celebration, but just a bunch of random people invited to trespass onto the park's property to party. He wasn't so sure about that. That sounded pretty dangerous.

Imagine inviting a bunch of rowdy people here to celebrate the holiday, wearing costumes, listening to loud spooky music and dancing, bobbing for apples and eating candy, and telling ghost stories-

Wait...

Wait, that would be amazing!

In a matter of seconds, the nervous sweat drops disappeared and his eyes were filled with sparkles.

The first Halloween celebration in Indigo Park in years! They hadn't even stayed open long enough to

have the last one, even though they were planning on it. This could be that party!

He had always imagined how wonderful that party might've been if they stayed open for just a few weeks more. Now they could do it, and he could be part of it! This could be the first step in his and Ed's journey to putting Indigo Park back on the map!

"Whoa, wait a second," Ed interjected. "First of all, this is still private property. If anybody caught us here, we could get arrested, and that risk doubles for every extra person. And the place isn't exactly in great condition. People would have to climb over stuff, things could fall. Somebody could get hurt."

"There wouldn't be that many people. I meant like less than twenty, and we wouldn't be running around the park. We'd set up in the plaza. Maybe set up the actual party in the café over there and then put streamers up so people can mingle out by the fountain. Come on, it could be a lot of fun! It'll be like this place reopened for the night."

Laura was trying to convince Ed, but what she was succeeding in doing was convincing Rambley.

A night with Indigo Park open! Sure, he would have to be strictly on the screen, but he would be able to watch and direct in all of the activities, just like he used to!

To hear laughter and joy instead of the oppressive silence of the park, even if it was just for one night...

“YES! Yes, you are more than welcome to throw a party!” Rambley blurted out.

Ed and Laura both looked back to him with their own shocked and joyous reactions respectively.

“See, he’s on board,” Laura said.

“Whoa, hold up. Let’s just think about this first. There’s a couple of reasons why that would be a really bad idea,” Ed tried to rationalize.

“Oh, I can think of plenty more than a couple. But imagine that! It would be just like the park was open to guests again!” Rambley gushed, his hands on his cheeks. “We could even host a costume contest!”

“We could even take them to the old Haunted House!” Laura suggested.

“Oooh no, that would be a very bad idea. But I’ve still got music from the haunted house! I could air it over the speakers as background ambience!” Rambley said, still with a big smile.

“That could work!”

“And I could lend you some of Indigo Park’s prize treat recipes! There is a pumpkin-ginger souffle that is to die for!”

“Oh my God, YES.”

Oh no, he was losing them.

But there wasn't much he could do except stand there dumbly as an excited Rambley and an eager Laura started shouting ideas back and forth.

Considering it was the first time Rambley really had any time to talk with Laura, Ed didn't really want to break it up.

Rambley needed this. He didn't need a Halloween Party, but he sure could use another friend. But at one point could he chime up yet again that this couldn't happen?

He looked between them, looked around to make sure their voices didn't lead anything up, looked at his phone- that was the answer right then. He tapped Laura's shoulder and showed her the time. She hissed.

"It's that late?" she asked. It had crept up on them both. She looked back to Rambley. "Sorry, but I'm going to have to go. I've got to get up at eight and be half-functional."

It was as though Rambley was snapped out of a trance. Down to even looking surprised at himself for having gotten so engaged. Maybe even a little embarrassed.

“But I’ll be back! Then we’ll start planning this whole shindig out.”

“Is that a promise or a threat?” Rambley asked.

“Both! Either way, we’ll be back,” Laura said. “It was nice to meet you, Rambley.”

Rambley smiled.

“Alright, let’s go,” Laura said, turning to Ed.

He nodded, gave a little wave to Rambley- Rambley silently grinned back, and led her back out of the park.

As they walked out the front gate, Laura slowed down to look towards the side door. However, it was closed so she couldn’t see what was, or who wasn’t,

inside. They continued to the fence but before they could climb through, Ed stopped and turned towards her with an uncertain look.

“Laura, about this party. I think this is a bad idea...”

“Why? Rambley’s on board.”

“I don’t think Rambley realizes what he’s signing up for,” he said. “Let me talk to him first. He might change his mind.”

“If he changes his mind then we call it off. But he seems to be into it.”

Of course he was into it. He was a socially deprived amusement park mascot whose main goals in life were to reopen the park and be back in the limelight. Tempting him with a Halloween Party was just as effective as tempting an actual raccoon with a handful of marshmallows and peanut butter.

It was a bad idea.

...But if Ed couldn't talk Ramsey out of it then he surely wouldn't talk Laura out of it.

"If he doesn't change his mind then... maybe." She broke into a smile, and he quickly added, "But if we do that, not too many people. Maybe five or six. Okay?"

"No problem. Just a couple of friends."

"Laura, I mean it. Only a few people. And nobody who's going to cause any problems or try to sneak back out here when I'm not here."

"Relax, it'll be fine. I'm not going to get anybody in trouble," she said with an almost knowing smile.

Ed wasn't sure what she thought she knew, but it surely wasn't the fact that throwing a party with a giant lion running around was a bad idea.

Laura looked off towards the door leading into the registration office. She got an interested little smile.

“So, is he cute?”

“Who?”

“Rambley,” Laura said, gesturing to the door with her eyes.

Ed’s stomach tightened. “What?”

“You know.” She gestured elaborately between them and the kiosk, then put in air quotes, “Rambley.”

Ed was still staring at her.

Laura rolled her eyes. “The guy you ran off to warn that we were coming in. I’m guessing the night guard?”

Oh, so that’s why she suddenly warmed up to Rambley suddenly. She thought there was someone behind the scenes controlling a virtual avatar, which technically there was.

“Right, gotcha. Uh... Didn’t realize you heard us talking.”

“I didn’t. I just saw you marathon sprint in there and the door shut. And now with Rambley suddenly being able to talk and have conversations, yeah, I put two and two together.”

Alas, the wrong two and two, but this could work for now.

Laura raised her brows questioningly, baiting for answers.

“Yeah, he’s pretty cute.”

“Cool. Cool.” Laura glanced over at the door.

“...Think I could take a peek?”

“Nah.”

She furrowed her brows.

“He’s pretty shy. That part of the reason for this whole... screen thing. He’s really the last employee left,” Ed explained. Technically none of it was a lie. Technically.

“Think he’ll come out for the party?” Laura asked.

“Maybe. Maybe in costume.”

“Guess that’s more reason for the party.”

Wait, no. That was not what he wanted to imply.

“He could lose his job if someone finds out he’s letting people in here. That’s a huge part of the reason why this is a bad idea,” Ed pointed out.

Laura seemed to brush this off. “Well, I hope I get to meet him.”

“You will, don’t worry.”

“But I’ve got to get going. I’ll call you when I get home.”

“Sounds good. Can you get around me?”

She raised her brows. “You’re staying?”

“Just for a little bit. Just to talk with Rambley.” Just to talk Rambley out of this party plan.

Laura got a teasing smile. “Don’t stay up too late.”

Somehow, he just couldn’t catch a break tonight. It didn’t matter what he said, he was getting himself in one hole or another.

Laura was merciful. She left without further probing and he helped her get around his car before waving her off, watching her taillights fade off down the road before turning and returning back to the front gate.

He was met by Rambley coming up on the screen as he walked up.

“Is the coast clear?” he asked unsurely.

“Yup. She’s gone.”

“Phew!” Rambley wiped his forehead. “That’s a relief. I got nervous when she started talking about sneaking a peek at the real Rambley.”

And he had heard that entire conversation. Good to know.

“But I think that went pretty darn well! She didn’t suspect a thing!” Rambley said with a proud, toothy grin. “And she seemed to get pretty comfy with the park.”

Ed entirely missed the odd inflection on that last comment.

“So, what did you think?” he asked.

“Of Laura?”

“Yeah.”

Ah yes, Laura. Ed's handsy friend who didn't spare him a second look until she needed to get permission for said party. Don't think Rambley didn't notice that one. He thought she was just-

"I think she's great! She's very friendly and very creative too. I would've never thought of us throwing our own Halloween Party to drum up interest in the park! And I admire her love of Indigo Park- a woman after my own heart! She even reminds me a little of Mollie, except you know, uh, eh... Okay, spill it. What's going on with you and Laura?"

The sudden shift in tone caught Ed off-guard.

"Wha?"

"You know what I mean. What's going on between you two? Putting on her Critter Cuff for her, helping her get around the park, helping her get into the train, doing whatever she says even when you know it could be very dangerous." Rambley grumbled that last part. He crossed his arms. "Are you really

friends? You two seem a little too close to just be friends.”

“Believe it or not, but we’re just friends,” Ed said.

Rambley looked like he didn’t believe him.

“I know, I know how it looks, but really, we’re just friends. She’s like my sister, we pretty much grew up together.”

“Really?”

“Really. It’s sort of like you and Mollie. You two weren’t together, right?”

“What? No! I loved her like a friend for sure, but nothing like that... Oh okay, I get what you’re saying.”

Saying it out loud with Mollie in mind made it all seem really silly. Especially since he himself had just compared her to Mollie. Rambley got an apologetic little smile.

“Gosh, I’m sorry for grilling you, Eddie. I shouldn’t have assumed anything like that. I don’t know, I guess seeing you two getting all cozy had me feeling like a third wheel. Especially since I couldn’t be there with you.”

“Aww, Buddy...”

A cartoonish blush appeared on the raccoon’s face, and he looked away.

Poor guy must’ve been going through the wringer getting cooped up somewhere watching them through cameras. Watching his only remaining friend hanging out with someone else who he assumed was his girlfriend. It didn’t help that Ed was so busy trying to show Laura around and reminiscing that they didn’t get much time with Rambley.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to ignore you,” Ed said sincerely.

“You didn’t ignore me. You were just distracted. That’s okay...” Rambley looked up at him again, the blush now gone. “But why didn’t you want her to see me? Was it really because you were worried how she’d react?”

Rambley deserved honesty so Ed bucked up and told him the truth.

“I got... scared.”

Rambley’s ears lowered. “You didn’t think she would take it well. I get it.”

“No, that’s not it. I think she’ll love you. I just... I get worried. Worried about you getting sick again. Worried about Laura accidentally saying something and somebody trying to come by when I’m not here,” Ed said. “I don’t think I told you, but it really scared me that day I couldn’t get you to wake up. And knowing that if something goes wrong that I can’t take you to a hospital, and that there’s nobody else we can go to for help... It scares me.”

Rambley's face softened from surprise to a gentle smile. Everything Ed was saying Rambley had worried about before in one way or another, but he had no idea Ed thought about it too.

"You were worried about me," Rambley said fondly.
"Aww, Eddie."

"But I do feel bad about it. I know you don't get a chance to meet people..."

"Don't feel bad! I'm glad you're thinking about me. I think about you a lot too, and I got worried knowing you two were going over to the Fairground because the security system over there is a little outdated. As long as I'm with you I can help keep you safe! But when I'm not, I've just got to trust that you're coming back in one piece."

"I can't make any promises, but I'll come back in as few pieces as I can, and I'll carry anything that drops off," Ed said with a little grin.

Rambley laughed. “Ha! Eww, Eddie, please. Halloween’s not for another week!”

“But I am sorry you had to sneak around like that.”

“Sneak around?” Rambley asked, cocking his head in confusion.

“Yeah, back at the fair. I saw you watching us.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I wasn’t at the fair- Wait. You didn’t... see me there, did you?” Rambley asked nervously.

“I mean, I saw a shadow...” Ed said. Both shared an uneasy look. “...But I was playing the game before it happened. Maybe it was my eyes playing tricks.”

“Maybe... best to get back here! You’re still staying the night, right?”

Ed smiled again. “Wouldn’t miss it.”

“That’s great! We can even start planning activities for the Halloween Party!”

Ed’s smile became a lot tighter at that.

“Yeah, the Halloween Party, uh... Look, I’m not so sure about this party. Laura has a lot more friends than I do. It could get loud, Lloyd’s pretty much right there-.”

“Oh, don’t worry about him! All I’d have to do is lock the theater door for as long as they’re here. Even if I didn’t, he probably wouldn’t notice. He’s only dangerous when he’s hungry or when someone comes walking in. I’m honestly surprised he went after you when you went to get the keys, but that could’ve been because you encroached on his territory. Hmph, his territory,” Rambley mumbled the end. He smiled again. “But don’t worry. There probably won’t even be a party! We were just spit balling ideas, heh. Unless she’s really planning on going through with it...” He rubbed his chin.

“She is,” Ed said knowingly. “Just... let’s think about it for a few days, okay? Sleep on it and really think if we want to do this,” Ed requested.

“That’s probably for the best. Maybe I’m rushing into this...” Rambley admitted with a sheepish smile.

“...But we could still brainstorm ideas, right? And hey, if we don’t have the party then we could just celebrate together!”

“Sure! I’ll be there in a few.”

“I’ll be waiting for you!” Rambley chirped.

With that, Ed started back into Indigo Park. Rambley lingered a moment longer, looking out into the darkness past the distant gate. Laura and her car now long gone.

But she would be back. Maybe with a bunch of party supplies, which would be good since Rambley wasn’t sure what condition the official Indigo Park Halloween decorations were in. Maybe she’d come back with Ed. He wasn’t sure how he felt about her

still, but she was Ed's friend, and they did seem to get along very well...

He decided then that the first thing he would do when Ed got there was to tell him that he wanted Laura to come back. Not because he was really excited to be the third wheel again, but because he wanted to do right by Ed. And besides, if Ed was this close with her then there had to be something special that Rambley was missing out on. He just couldn't make it a contest.

Heavens knows that he didn't tend to win contests like that.

And if this Halloween Party was going to happen, then it would put Indigo Park back on the map! It would be just like old times! Rambley knew the risks, but he was ready to take them.

It was just like Laura said. For one night Indigo Park would be open again!

Maybe things would turn out alright.

Then Ed bolted back out the gate at record speed to go get the takeout that had been sitting in his car for over an hour.

Or maybe not. Despite what Laura had said she didn't show up the next day, or the next, and Rambley started to think that she silently called off the party idea sometime in between.

Maybe she realized it was a bad idea. Maybe she had just been playing along and really hadn't intended on it. Maybe Ed had talked her out of it, but Ed hadn't said anything about it if he had.

Rambley was maybe a little disappointed, but he shook it off quick. This was the best-case scenario, really. The safest option. A party was just too much attention. Besides, he already had another party lined up! Ed and he were just going to celebrate Halloween themselves with some scary movies and popcorn. That was already leagues better than last Halloween.

Admittedly, he usually tended to watch cartoon specials and sleep on holidays, so it would've been leagues better even without the popcorn.

But Ed wasn't going to be there for a while. He had a Halloween stream going where he played spooky games, which Rambley was currently watching. Curled up on his little couch with Ed's phone tightly clasped in his hands, grinning as he watched.

He hadn't seen Ed use his webcam before, but today he was, decked out in a black costume with a white screaming face mask. If it wasn't for his voice, he would've been entirely unrecognizable. Maybe he'd show up in it. It made Rambley consider dressing up himself, but he couldn't think of any costumes he could wear. Maybe he could find his conductor hat...

When suddenly, he had the little chill that signaled someone was at the front gate. He blinked and looked down at the screen again. That was definitely Ed, and he was definitely live, so it couldn't be him.

Inwardly dreading it a little, he peeked through the cameras.

And wouldn't you know it, there was Laura heaving a bunch of plastic bags on her arms as she staggered towards the gate. Her hair was now black at the tips, but the rest was the same, so he recognized her easily.

Rambley set the phone down and focused on placing himself onto the screen. He didn't have his mo-cap suit on, but he made do with facial emoting alone.

She jumped a little when the screen suddenly turned on.

"Laura? What are you doing here?" he asked.

She smiled. "What do you think?"

She held up the bags and jiggled them, and he could catch a glimpse of orange and black peeking out of some of them.

“Are you still in?”

They had to be Halloween decorations. She had to mean the Halloween Party. They were still having the party?!

“YES!” Rambley eagerly agreed, tossing any concern aside. Except for one thing. “But wait, what about Eddie?”

“Eddie, huh? He’s streaming tonight. I tried to call him before the stream and he didn’t pick up, but I left him a message! Don’t worry, he’ll be here.”

“Heh, he must be busy,” Rambley said a little nervously.

Good thing he wasn’t wearing his suit, so he didn’t accidentally project the motion of him sliding Ed’s phone into his couch cushions.

“But come on in! If you need a refresher, it’s through the turnstile and to the right, over the hill and through

the tunnel and over the hill, and out into the main plaza. I'll meet you there!"

Surprisingly, Laura was able to make it all the way back to the fountain all by herself even with all those bags. She toted them into the café and then, after a visible gag that Rambley caught through the camera and snickered at, deposited them onto the floor. Out of one she pulled out a box of trash bags and one of disposable gloves, pulled some on, and got to work.

Much to Rambley's continued surprise, Laura began to clean out all the rotten and moldy food from the counters. She managed to fit it all in a single oversized garbage bag alongside most of the loose trash spread around the floor. Then, much to Rambley's dismay, she shoved it all behind the door leading into the kitchen as a quick hiding spot. The leftover boxes and trash followed behind it.

She opened the refrigerator next and then promptly shut it back and walked off with her hands up. It was a lost cause.

She switched gloves and then cleaned off the top and front of the counters with some disinfectant wipes. Then picked up the fallen chairs and pushed them into the tables before quickly wiping them down as well.

Finally, she started to put up the decorations. She taped up some orange and black flag streamers onto the wall and unfurled some paper pumpkin table toppers and put them on the counters and tables. She got out a bag of 'spider webs', which looked more like strands of cotton, and made a rounded base on the counter where she placed a plastic cauldron.

Rambley hated that he couldn't help. It almost itched watching someone working on his park and not being able to do anything except observe and sometimes dictate, not that he was as comfortable giving her directions and suggestions as he was to Ed. Ed was all too eager to go along with his ideas, but anyone else could find him pushy.

That was one of his big rules when it came to being an attendant at the park. Don't be pushy, always make sure to show off a variety of Indigo Park products, and... treat all guests equally. Okay, maybe he didn't exactly follow that last one, but there had to be a 'closed eight years, gotta keep him around' clause.

Once Laura slapped some bloody hand and ghost decals onto the display glass and windows, she left the café and starting walking towards the kiosk. Rambley beat her there.

"You're doing a great job in there!" he called.

"Thanks! You want to come down and help?" she offered.

"Uh, n-no that's alright. I wouldn't want to get in the way of your artistic vision!"

"Yeah, yeah."

Laura headed back inside to continue working. Rambley realized then that she had only come outside to invite him to help. That made him feel a little bad for turning her down, but what else could he do?

She came back out and called, “Hey, there’s no rats here, right?”

Thankfully she was too far away to see Rambley’s resulting flustered look. “Nope! No rats! Heh. Not anymore...”

“Good! I’m putting out some candy if you want some!”

Oh, that was a dangerous offer.

He watched through the camera as she ripped open a bag of candy and dumped it into the cauldron. Yes, he was definitely going to have “some”.

But he was patient, forcing himself to not continue staring at the candy cauldron and instead watching

her work. She put up a few more decorations, emptying each of the bags that she had brought and funneling the trash into one, which was then tossed with the rest.

She admired her work from the door, took a picture with her phone, and headed out towards the fountain. Then she looked around as though considering what, if anything, she could do out there.

Not much she must've decided, because shortly afterwards she walked towards the kiosk and called out.

“I’m taking off! I’ll be back in a few hours!”

“Okay! Watch out for any ghosts and ghouls!”
Rambley called back.

He followed her on the screens back to the front, briefly dropping in on the tunnel screen- “How long do you think you’re going to be?” “Only a few hours. Probably right at dark.” -and then again out at the gate.

“Take care and come back soon!” he called after her. She waved back at the screen as she left.

You know, maybe he had gotten her all wrong. She didn’t seem so bad at all, and she was still pretty nice even when Ed wasn’t here. Maybe he could’ve gone ahead and showed himself to her...

It wasn’t worth dwelling on now, he guessed. He had more important things to take care of. So, he got right to work.

The first thing he did was put on the work gloves and bolt down to the café to grab the garbage bag and drag it off somewhere where it wouldn’t be seen or smelled... and double-checked and make sure there was absolutely no way that any of the food was still useable. It wasn’t, clearly, but there was no harm in checking. Food was food.

With that done, he grabbed a broom and quickly swept out the café before doing another quick once-over of the café with the cleaning wipes Laura

had left behind. Then he aligned and adjusted some of the decorations until everything was as perfect as he could get it to look in such a short amount of time.

Then his eyes landed on the cauldron, and he rubbed his hands together.

Poor, sweet, naïve Laura. Leaving a bowl of candy where any wild animal could just sneak right up and scoop out a handful. Or two. Or three!

Rambley got a wicked little smile as he crept over and snatched up the bowl. That grin dropped into a disappointed frown as he looked inside.

“Is it all chocolate?” he muttered.

Ugh, his luck of course. He grumbled as he picked out the pieces that were clearly not chocolate. That would have to do. But he could enjoy them later—there was still work to be done!

The next step was making sure that the music would work. It didn’t take long to search the song databank

and find the Haunted House and various 'fall fair' ambiances saved inside. He put some on to broadcast and then stepped out beside the fountain to listen.

Sure enough, there was music! It was a little faint and somewhat crunchy, likely from there only being a few speakers still functional, but it still worked for the most part. Maybe that even made it creepier.

He also made sure then to activate the locks on the theater's front door. Lloyd wasn't going to get any chance to cause a scene, never again.

Then it was back to the treehouse where Rambley snapped on his mo-cap suit and cap, grabbed Ed's cell phone, and then holed himself up in the security office in the back of Jetstream Junction. This would allow him to be close enough to hear the celebration without a significant risk of being caught. But he still wasn't done.

It took a painstaking while, but Rambley figured out how to change his model on the screen. There were

only a couple; the conductor hat, which activated automatically at times and thus didn't need his direct influence, a Santa hat, and a vampire costume for Halloween. One that would give Rambley a black and red cape and cuffs.

Rambley was sure he must've used these dozens of times up until his mascot period, but he had forgotten how since it had been so long. After his initial mascot attempt it was sort of on a timer directed by the date, but before that he did it himself- though he was drawing a blank on how he did it. Eh, he'd figure it out.

Then all he had to do was wait, and he did that by returning to Ed's stream. It soothed his anxious excitement. He peeled the wrapped off a square of taffy and popped it in his mouth. He hummed with delight.

So far, so good. Everything was going according to plan.

Outside the sun eventually went down. Rambley got up to stretch his legs and peeked out once or twice. He started getting a little uneasy once it got dark- it was always safest to be home once it did- but he still stuck around, and soon enough he felt the alert of someone at the front gate. Considering that Ed was still streaming, he had a hunch who it was.

Sure enough, he peeked through the camera and found Laura walking up with a small group of people. Seven specifically, all around the same age as her and Ed and many of them were in costume.

Including Laura herself, who had put on a hooded black and purple dress. The hood had a pair of cat ears on it and a tail dangling from the skirt, and she had a triangle nose, and whiskers painted on her face. She was carrying a covered aluminum tray.

The rest of the guests were as followed.

At Laura's side helping her carry another tray and a jug of red liquid, likely punch, was another young woman. She was about Laura's height with platinum

blond hair pulled into a high ponytail and was wearing a rather striking pink and bright yellow spandex suit. It looked like she was there to work out... and arrived just about forty years too late.

Sort of behind them was a taller guy with long russet hair, which might've been a wig, and a backwards baseball cap barely fitting on top. He wore a green overshirt with jeans and sneakers. It was clear he was trying to emulate a character but what character it was, Rambley didn't know.

Now there was one costume that Rambley DID recognize. There was someone in a full-body Lloyd costume. Not just a cheap Halloween costume either, but like a real mascot costume- Heck, it looked better than some of the costumes the employees used IN Indigo Park. It must've cost a small fortune! It was custom made and pretty cute!

...Or it would've been cute if it wasn't Lloyd. Ugh, of course it would be Lloyd. But Rambley put his feelings aside considering this was the only Indigo Park costume of the lot. The guy- or girl- went all out

and it would be no wonder or bias if they won the costume contest.

Especially since there were two guys who hadn't worn costumes. One standing beside the Lloyd with his phone out, wearing a casual hoodie, jeans, and sneakers.

Maybe he was supposed to be a character who dressed like a normal person going to a party, Rambley considered.

The other guy, wearing a polo, was standing in the back with a girl dressed in a polka dot pink and white dress with a long blond wig and a guy dressed sort of like he came out of the 1930s or 40s, with a long beige coat. He was carrying a drink cooler with him while polo guy was carrying a glass or plastic punch bowl and a bag of plastic cups.

"Hey, Rambley!" Laura called.

Well, no time like the present, he supposed. He popped up onto the screen, pleased to see that his vampire costume model was still on.

“Hello, everybody! Welcome to Indigo Park’s Halloween Extravaganza! Glad to have you here.”

The reactions were a little mixed. The girl at her side’s mouth dropped open in a sort of mild surprise, one guy was taking pictures, another was just watching nonchalantly, three in the back who were talking looked up before returning to talking, though now turned towards the gate like they were preparing for it to open. The only one who looked a little unnerved was the curly haired guy.

“Glad to be here!” Laura played along. She noticed the look on spandex girl’s face and grinned.

“What is going on?” the long haired guy leaned in and whispered.

“Play along, it’s all good,” Laura brushed off. “This is Katie, Daryl, Zack, Leo, Dani, Josh, and Vick. Everybody, this is Rambley. He’s adorable.”

Unfortunately, only the first two were pointed out, so the rest of the names weren’t placed with a face. Would it be presumptuous to assume Leo was the Lloyd? Ah well, it didn’t matter! He could get their names while he was setting up their Critter Cuffs!

“Aww, Laura. You’re too kind!” Rambley said. He clasped his hands with glistening eyes. “I’m so excited to have you all here tonight! This is going to be the first Halloween Party in eight years, can you believe it?! Well, let’s not waste any time. Why don’t you come on in?”

He started opening the gates. Though before Laura could start in, Daryl stopped her with a hand on her arm.

“Hold up. How’s he know your name?” he asked uneasily.

Laura rolled her eyes. “Because he’s a...” Laura’s voice trailed into a whisper that Rambley couldn’t hear, but he had no doubt that she was telling him her security guard theory.

“Oookay. That makes a little more sense. Could’ve given me a head’s up,” Daryl said. He looked up at the screen again before scrunching his brows.

“That’s still kind of weird.”

“Don’t overthink it. Hey, Rambley! You want to come out and hang out?” Laura asked.

Despite the fact that it was a very polite offer that Rambley oh so wished he could partake in, for some reason he was suddenly filled with deep sinking dread that he couldn’t shake.

Maybe an instinctual reminder to not get too cozy with the new guests. There was absolutely no way he could be seen by anybody, let alone all these people.

“Wish I could, but I’ve got to keep a lookout on the park right now. Maybe later!” Rambley kindly declined.

Daryl was giving him a funny look again but nobody else did. The cartoon raccoon insistently gestured towards the door and Laura got the message.

“Okay, guys! Follow me!” she called back. She led the way inside, with Katie looking around both nervously and excitedly while Daryl eyed the screen suspiciously as he passed by. Lloyd waved as he passed, and the others just walked past.

Rambley popped himself to the screen above the turnstile to continue the tour.

“Since this is your first time in the park- assumedly- why don’t we step into the Critter Corner and get you all suited up with your very own Critter Cuffs? My treat!” Rambley offered.

This would be great! He could get all their names and keep an eye on their vitals while they were in

the park, read their moods, maybe even collect valuable data for the reopening plans-

“No, it’s okay! I’ve got it!” Laura said, holding up her own Critter Cuff. “Come on, guys. Right through here.”

Then she bumped the censor on the turnstile, with a jug in hand to boot, and scooted her way through. She then used her cuff to let the others through right behind her, much to Rambley’s disappointment.

“Uh, that was not exactly what I, umm... well, alright! But there’s plenty of Critter Cuffs to go around if anyone wants one.”

The Lloyd raised a hand and pointed towards the Critter Corner door. Well, at least one person was willing to stick with the proper Indigo experience. So, while Laura led the others to the tunnel, Rambley popped into the gift shop to give the Lloyd his cuff.

The Lloyd was very animated. Probably because with his lion head on he couldn’t show surprise, so

he had to exaggerate a little. Rambley knew that feeling.

“Here you go!” he chirped as he lowered the cuff down the chute. “And let me tell you, I really like your costume. You’re a shoo-in for the winner of the best costume contest!”

“Tis not a costume! I am Lloydford Lion! Actor extraordinaire!” the guy proclaimed.

“Heh, yeah. You do sound like my uh, buddy Lloyd.” Rambley covered his contempt for said lion as best as he could. “You know what? Why don’tcha help yourself to a Lloyd plush? Or a keychain!”

“...Really?”

“Really,” Rambley said. Almost snickering at how fast his tune changed.

Though the Lloyd got right back into character. “That sounds purrrfect! Allow me to make a brief stop at

my car to retrieve my wallet so I may pay for your humble service!”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. It’s on the house! Here at Indigo Park, we really appreciate when folks dress up like our beloved characters!... And Lloyd.”

The Lloyd guy pointed at him like he got the joke- it wasn’t a joke- and figuratively pounced on the offer and claimed a Lloyd keychain for himself. Rambley was half surprised that he didn’t walk out with the giant display Lloyd, but he supposed it was probably best to hang onto that.

“Ah, thank you, thank you. I will cherish this token!”

Boy, this guy had to be Lloyd’s biggest fan. Hey, maybe that meant he was a frequent guest back when they were open!”

“Sooo, you seem to be a fan of Indigo Park,” Rambley began. He gave his best shmoozing smile. “Think I could maybe pick your brain about what you

would want going forward if Indigo Park was planning on re-.”

A scream interrupted the question. It was loud enough that even the Lloyd guy heard it, but Rambley picked it up on his sensors immediately.

“Hold that thought!” he cried and left the screen.

He flicked through the cameras before he caught sight of the incident, and quickly calmed down. Looks like spandex girl had a little spill and went down the rubble hill on her bottom. Laura was currently helping her up.

Rambley hopped to the screen in the tunnel. “Everybody okay?” he checked in.

“We’re good! Katie slipped but she’s okay,” Laura called back.

“Oh good! Indigo Park is experiencing some... is currently preparing to undergo a major renovation. Make sure to watch your step, everyone! And don’t

go exploring alone- take a buddy and watch your step.”

“That first step’s a doozy,” Daryl mumbled, huffing as he proceeded to go stumbling down the rubble.

Rambley snickered a little. Ed had made it look so easy; guess everyone wasn’t as prepared as him. He hoped he’d show up soon.

He continued to observe as Laura led in the rest of her group and took them to the next mound of rubble to clamor over.

“Another one?” the other girl who wasn’t Katie complained.

“Just one more and we’re there!” Laura assured.

“Come on, it’s part of the adventure!”

“Well, if you’d like a REAL adventure, how about we take a long shot cut through myyyy.... Umm...”

Rambley had been so eager to suggest his railroad. He was even halfway through gesturing towards it when he took one look at the tired, confused group of adults and realized maybe that wasn't the best suggestion.

That's what it said online, wasn't it? That he was too childish. Too aimed to a younger demographic. These guys wouldn't want to ride on his little train...

"Through...?" Laura pointed towards the entrance of the railroad knowingly.

Rambley glanced sideways towards it before getting a somewhat tight smile.

"Never mind! We should really take the short-short cut and get straight to the party. The night won't last forever!"

Then the screen shut off.

Laura scrunched her face with confusion but let it go. Instead focusing on getting the others, and the food

and drink, over the rubble, past the fountain, and into the café.

Which she did! Rambley watched as the others admired the park and the fountain, assumedly, and saw the excellent work done on the café. He saw her take notice that he had moved some stuff, but he wasn't sure if she knew it was him or just thought she misremembered how she left it.

Soon the punch bowl was on the counter and filled up with the jug Laura brought. She didn't put what was left anywhere near the fridge and instead just kept it under the counter and put some ice from the cooler in the bowl to keep it chilled.

The food was, in no exaggeration, almost worth risking his skin for. Laura hadn't made any of the Indigo recipes because she hadn't come back to get them, but she did make her own selection of Halloween snacks. Assumedly, they might've also been made by her friend who helped her carry the containers.

Deviled egg eyeballs, pigs-in-a-blanket mummies, marshmallows; so many colorful foods all set out buffet styled for anyone to grab. And only one guy was really digging in? Crazy!...

Gosh, he was hungry. He wasn't even due to have his second rations yet and the candy wasn't exactly filling. Maybe if Ed got here soon enough, he could ask him to get him a plate, or a tray... Wait, no. That wouldn't be fair to make Ed be his waiter when he was supposed to be partying. He could always get some of the leftovers, hopefully before they threw them away.

But that wasn't important. What was important was that the party was starting. Laura dragged a chair out to sit outside the door, pulled out a small speaker from her bag, and set it up to play music. It, mixed with the spooky music playing overhead, gave the abandoned park the liveliest feel it had in ages. It was the final cherry on top.

And then the party began!

...Well, sort of. It started with them just sort of standing around talking and some of them, especially hoodie guy, digging into the food. But it was pretty lowkey. Rambley fought the urge to start proposing activities, lest Laura insist he come down and show them how to pin the tail on the... scarecrow?

They weren't bobbing for apples. They weren't even really dancing. They were just sort of standing around mingling. Which was fine! But not very exciting.

But then he got an alert at the gate. He perked up, it had to be Ed. He eagerly switched to that camera and almost instantly his face fell as he saw it was just more partygoers coming in. He hopped to the screen.

"Hello and welcome to Indigo Park! I'm Rambley, Rambley the Raccoon, and the party is: this way! Go right on past the turnstile and through the tunnel!"

They looked at him, but it was more of that confusion and brief acknowledgement. They noticed him but more so just acknowledged him, like they just assumed that he was some sort of virtual welcome sign. That was fine, he was just glad that they were eager to get in.

They soon arrived at the café and were greeted into the fold. People seemed more excited now, finally getting into the feel of things.

This would be an excellent time to start the first activity, Rambley thought. He projected himself to the nearby kiosk.

“Hey, I have an idea!” he called.

Nobody heard him. Or if they did, nobody seemed interested.

“Of course, they can’t hear me all the way down here...” Rambley mumbled. He tried to speak up a little louder. “Hello! Hey! Anybody there!?”

One of the later party guests looked over but then sort of shuffled off afterwards. Either ignoring him or too creeped out to entertain him. Rambley deflated, his ears drooping. He sighed to himself.

Okay, so maybe he would have to wait for Laura to start the games on her own. That was a-okay, since he already had his hands full. He already got another alert at the front gate.

It wasn't Eddie but a couple more people. He didn't even try offering Critter Cuffs, not when everyone looked at him funny. Someone even got their phone out, but Rambley flicked off the screen before they could snap a photo.

He popped back up in the tunnel to direct them through before looking at the square again, and that was when he noticed a lot of those spooky plastic Halloween cups being carried around.

But not all of them looked like they had punch in them. He spotted a few cans in the cooler and on the tables inside the cafe and put two and two together.

They were drinking. Now, alcohol wasn't banned from the park and a quick look at these folks suggested that they all looked to be old enough to drink- at least Rambley hoped they were, as only two of them had on Critter Cuffs and only one of them, Laura, was confirmed to be old enough to drink. What concerned Rambley more was what that alcohol could do. It could make folks rowdy.

It didn't even have to start kicking in before that happened.

The pressure censor in the theater door was going off. Oh no.

Rambley had to switch cameras to see what was going on. He expected to see nothing and know that Lloyd was trying to push through on the other side. Instead, he found a couple of guys not in costume standing there with one pulling at the door, trying to yank it open. Oh heck no.

He quickly hooked onto the closest speaker and projected his voice through, and this time made sure he was loud enough.

“Hey, cut that out!” he called. Maybe a little too loud; the one guy not pulling on the door jumped and looked around wildly. “The Main Stage Theater is closed for repairs, thank you very much.”

“What the-?”

He didn’t appreciate the following language.

He kept watching them until they left, his fingers tapping on the desk and his tail flicking in annoyance as he waited, and he only slightly relaxed when they left. The nerve of some people! At least Lloyd didn’t go bananas over it. Seemed like everything was still quiet on the inside of the theater for right now.

He returned to peeking at the café and could see some of the guests smiling and chatting, and that made him feel better again. Maybe it was a boring party, but at least people were having fun!

And then there was another alert, though this one was different. Not an immediate alarm but just a growing hunch sort of feeling.

Someone was in his railroad. He could feel it, he could tell.

Rambley frantically swapped cameras, dreading to see what he might find. Turned out it was Lloyd guy and Katie walking down the tracks looking at the ride.

Normally Rambley would find this endearing, but he was slowly growing more on edge. What was to stop such a big fan of Lloyd from trying to take the Lloyd cutout at the end of the ride? As much as he wasn't a fan of Lloyd, Lloyd's cutout was necessary for his ride. It would be affecting the whole experience!

He said he could help himself. He must've known that he didn't mean everything in the park, right? Right?

Rambley's heart was pounding in his chest as he watched them passing through the Oceanic Odyssey section, getting ever closer to the Lloyd section. Hopefully they would turn around at Salem's broken section.

But then he was alerted to someone being at the gate again. He ripped his eyes away from the two and forced himself out to the gate to watch as more people were heading through. He hadn't noticed how many had passed, and there were still some over by the fence talking.

H-How many guests were there now? More than twenty. Thirty? He couldn't tell because he only gave out two Critter Cuffs.

He looked through the camera and could see people trying to figure out how to climb into the tunnel and his pulse kept climbing along with it. There were a lot more people than he was expecting, and he was the only employee on staff.

Where was Laura? He looked for her and found her greeting someone with a hug. More new people? Was she keeping track? Someone needed to keep track and he was having trouble keeping count.

Oh goodness, wait, his railroad!

He flipped back to the railroad and was startled to see that somehow in that short amount of time- how long was it? -not only had the Lloyd fan made it to Lloyd's section, but he currently had an arm around the Lloyd cutout while Katie was taking a picture of him. They had exited the track and were standing directly IN the exhibit.

It was just an innocent picture, that's all, but was he leaning on it? If he was leaning on it- if it broke? What if they bent the cutout? Rambley couldn't replace that!

SMASH

Oh no. What was that?

Rambley wasn't even sure where the sound picked up from and it wasn't until he heard it again that he was able to pinpoint it to main street, within only twenty feet of the information kiosk.

Surprise, surprise, it was the two goons who tried to yank open the theater's door, but now they were doing something much worse. They were throwing rocks at some of the upper windows- What were they thinking?! Weren't these adults?!

Rambley was filled with anger as he projected himself onto the kiosk.

"You two stop that immediately or I'm calling the police!" he barked. The same one jumped again. "I mean it! I want you out of my park! NOW!"

Normally he wouldn't be so rude to a couple of guests, but he was worn down to his last nerve with this whole ordeal. And they were purposefully vandalizing his park! Breaking windows that he couldn't replace!

Maybe it would've been better if they did get into the theater...

“Hey, I’m talking to you!” he shouted. Annoyed by the fact that the two were now whispering to each other instead of turning and leaving. “Go on! Get going!”

They were staring at him for a long second and Rambley huffed and went to switch off.

Stopped only by the sight of a rock hitting the kiosk screen and bouncing off.

Thankfully the screen was reinforced so it didn’t immediately shatter, but being one of Rambley’s few lines of projection there was immediate panic.

“Did- Did you just throw a rock at me?!”

He heard a rather nonchalant call of “Yeah” before the other guy bent over and grabbed a piece of crumbled cement to throw. It flew right over the kiosk, Rambley ducking reflexively.

“Stop it!” he cried. But the barrage continued. “I’M CALLING SECURITY!” he yelled.

But there was no security to call, and they didn’t take the bait.

Now they were both throwing rocks. He couldn’t hear what they were saying, but he could surely see their nasty grins. They thought it was a big game.

Then the one picked up a bigger hunk of concrete. One that would surely shatter the screen. Rambley was helpless to do anything but watch wide-eyed as he hoisted it up and went to launch it-

-and Laura came storming up and instantly started chewing them out.

“What are you two doing?! I thought we had a deal and you’re out here trying to break stuff?! What the hell?!”

“Laura, come on-.”

“Don’t Laura, come on me! We. Had. A. Deal. You always pull this-!”

From that point there was a lot more swearing, and they were gradually getting louder and louder. Her pointing at the more aggressive guy and him getting more and more red in the face.

Rambley watched anxiously until it evolved into a shouting match and finally some of the others came to break it up. The two girls that came with Laura led her back into the café and some other guy told off the troublemakers who thankfully decided to stop their assault on the kiosk and headed down the street.

Or that is, up the street.

By now Rambley had pulled himself off the kiosk and was looking through the cameras to see the damage when he realized they were heading right down the way towards Jetstream Junction.

Where he currently was.

“Oh no...”

Those two were coming towards Jetstream Junction and... and the front entrance was still wide open. People could walk right in. They could come around back. He could get cornered.

A different sort of panic set in. Suddenly the park wasn't the only thing in danger.

They were only supposed to stay in the plaza. They weren't supposed to be vandals, they weren't supposed to be mean, it wasn't supposed to be like this.

He needed help. He needed to get Laura, now. He looked for her again and saw her back in the café, trying to calm down with her friends. She wasn't anywhere near any of the speakers.

She heard the ordeal from the kiosk though. He projected himself there and began to desperately call out.

“Laura!” he cried. “Laura! LAURA!”

But she didn’t come out. Laura could not hear him. But she had to! He was shouting at her, he-

She was ignoring him. He knew she had to be. She couldn’t or wouldn’t help him.

There was only one person who could help him now, Ed. Maybe he could find a way to comment in his stream and tell him to come over.

He checked the phone desperately but found that the stream had already ended. Maybe that was a good thing. Ed was supposed to come by after the stream, he could already be on his way. He could only hope.

He pulled his legs up into the office chair and wrapped his tail securely around himself, huddling

into himself, and watched through the cameras as the party continued to go on outside.

The park was livelier than it had been in years and he felt entirely helpless.

...

Ed had just wrapped up the stream and finally pulled the plasticky white mask off his face. He rubbed under his eyes where the rough rim had pressed in, irritating his skin. Next time he was going to have to wear the costume for longer than five minutes before he decided it was comfortable enough to sit in for hours.

Ah well. At least he could get a break for a while. He was planning to take it with him to the park but he sure wasn't planning on driving in it.

It was going to be nice to have a lowkey night after that. He had gotten the snacks together already, including a giant bag of popcorn balls, and now all he had to do was grab his laptop and head over.

But before he shut his computer down, he quickly pulled up Harmony to check the message she had sent. He had gotten the notification during the stream but hadn't been able to check it until now. Considering how quiet she had been all day, he assumed it would be a message wishing him a Happy Halloween. Maybe one inviting him to a Halloween party since they didn't go ahead with the one at the park.

Or that's what he thought before he saw the message Laura had sent him.

“Heading to Indigo Park ;)”

That better not mean what he knew it meant.

He didn't even take off the billowy black cloak. He bolted out of his apartment, barely stopping himself to lock the door, and sprinted to his car. He got in, struggled to get his seatbelt on with the cloak getting everywhere, and turned on the car before backing out.

He briefly acknowledged the popcorn ball bag sitting in his backseat. Well, at least he wasn't heading over there empty handed.

Then he all but sped to Indigo Park. Thankfully, due to the secluded nature of the park, once he got onto the road leading to it there was virtually no traffic. He was able to push the limit without the risk of being stopped and peeled down the bumpy road at record speed.

And then almost rearended a random car that he wasn't expecting. Much to his horror, it wasn't the only one there. There were plenty of them.

He was going to kill Laura.

Ed slammed his car door shut and began to run towards the gate, overtaking a trip of guests in costumes climbing out of their car.

It was pitch dark out and people were coming to a closed down park dressed in Halloween costumes

way more expensive than his. It was insane. No, not insane. Absolutely terrifying. If any of them saw Rambley-

As he was bolting to the gate the screen blipped on and off, and then on again to reveal Rambley. His model was swapped with one wearing a vampire costume and he looked distressed.

“Eddie!”

Ed stumbled over his own feet and backed up to the screen. Rambley breathed a sigh of relief seeing him, but then straightened with a frantic cry.

“Thank goodness you’re here! There’s so many people and they’re breaking windows and they’re walking around in my railroad! I don’t know what to do! There’s- There’s these guys who were causing trouble and... You were right! This whole party was a bad idea. I... I just want them out of here,” Rambley quietly said. His head turned down ashamed.

Poor guy... Ed might've known this was a bad idea, but he hadn't wanted it to go like this. He didn't feel vindicated at all, just sad. Well, sad and frustrated, and antsy. He had to get these guests gone.

"Don't worry, we're going to get them out of here."

"But how?!"

That was a good question.

Well, the quickest way would be to get the cops involved, but that would also be a complete disaster that would involve them all getting trespassed, this likely getting into the news, and whatever company who owned Indigo Park getting involved, if they still existed. That was a no go. No cops could get involved, and if they didn't get everyone out of here fast they would be.

And that was when it suddenly hit Ed as he was standing there swinging his head around and trying to think, he didn't need the cops to come. He just needed people to think the cops were coming.

“Like this- HEY!” Ed turned and called to the group coming in. “The cops are on their way!” They seemed confused. “Security just called the cops! We’ve got to get everybody out of here!”

And they bought it. They turned and started to book it right back out- save the girl who arrived in a pair of heels. She wouldn’t have likely made it into the park anyways.

Then Ed began to sprint inside, catching up with a guy at the tunnel and shouting the news like he was the town crier.

He clamored through the tunnel and raced past the fountain shouting like the cops were currently on his heels. People were either quickly leaving or looking very confused. The guests who had been there for a while, including Laura, weren’t so quick to run off. Instead looking at Ed like he was insane.

He found Laura in the café and beelined up to her.

“Hey, look, the cops are coming. They’re already on their way. We’ve got to get everyone out of here.”

“What do you mean the cops are coming? How?!”
Laura asked in surprise.

He didn’t expect her to actually ask. He had to think fast.

“So, uh, I was out on the highway, and I saw this guy pulled over... and when I was driving by, the cop stopped me. And he told me that there was a party and there were cops coming-.”

Rambley couldn’t hear what was going on, but he noticed that it was taking Ed a while to relay the message. And Laura looked confused more than anything.

Maybe they didn’t believe him?

...You know what? That was fine. If they didn’t want to believe Ed, then they’d believe him.

Then he did something that he probably should've done ages ago, he set off the fire alarm.

In an instant a blaring alarm went off from every available speaker in the park. Loud and piercing, wailing over their heads. He punctuated it with his own voice over the intercom.

“Attention Indigo Park guests! The police department will be arriving shortly! Please line up in a single file line and get your ID for the officers, thank you!” he chirped.

Ed was a genius, because it worked.

In an instant, panic set in across the partygoers. Nobody wanted to be there when the cops showed up because everyone knew they weren't supposed to be there.

And now the doubtful Laura was looking convinced, looking up at the nearest speaker with a surprised 'o' mouth.

“Wait, the cops are actually coming?!” she asked.

“Uh, yeah. You heard the raccoon,” Ed fumbled out. He gave her a gentle push towards the tunnel. “You go on ahead. I’ve got to make sure everyone else gets out.”

Laura seemed a little hesitant but started to head out while Ed jogged over to the information kiosk, catching sight of Russ and Shaun high tailing it down the street towards him. Neither of which were in costume. Probably crashed the party, Ed doubted Laura would’ve willingly invite her ex. At least he hoped he wouldn’t with his history.

He knew Russ was probably eyeballing him as he passed, but he didn’t engage. Pretended he didn’t even notice as he looked around at the ground like he lost something. Russ didn’t ask, and Ed made sure that he was on his way out before he pressed the red button on the kiosk.

“Hey. I’m here.”

The screen alit to reveal Rambley looking just as defeated as earlier.

“Are you okay?” Ed asked.

“I’m fine,” Rambley said quietly. He sighed. “What a mess...”

“We can clean it up.”

“You don’t understand, they were breaking windows! A-And what if they stole stuff? We can’t replace props, they don’t make ‘em anymore!”

They were breaking windows? No wonder Rambley was upset. Ed was upset and this was his first time hearing about it.

“Don’t worry about that. I didn’t see anyone leaving with anything. And we have to replace the windows anyway, right? We’ll just cover them up with a garbage bag until we can get them fixed. No big deal!”

But it was clearly a big deal to Rambley. He looked away with a wobbly frown.

“Where are you, Buddy? At home?”

“I’m in the security office behind Mollie’s Landing Pad...”

“Sit tight. I’m on my way,” Ed said. He started to jog off-

“Wait, wait!”

He came back.

“There were a couple of guys causing trouble. I think they might be in Jetstream Junction,” Rambley said tensely, wringing his hands.

He had to mean Russ and Shaun.

“I saw them. They’re on their way out,” Ed said, pointing back.

Rambley's shoulders slumped in relief. "Good."

"I'll be right there. Don't go anywhere."

Then he began to jog off. Still riding off the adrenaline from all of this.

Ed decided to run straight through Jetstream Junction and Mollie's Landing Pad, both because it would guarantee that he caught anyone if they snuck in there and because it just felt like the quicker option compared to taking the long way around. It probably wasn't, but at least running straight through didn't involve as much climbing.

Besides, it was a lot cooler to go racing in like a badass. Even if it was while wearing a glorified trash bag and hopping around an oversized fast-food playground.

But on the plus side he didn't have to go running around looking for codes this time, and didn't have a creepy mutated bird running on his heels. The lights were even on and the music back to normal!... It

didn't stop him from getting the creeps, but he just focused on getting back to Rambley. Slipping down short slides and hopping across trampolines, feeling a safer rush from the first time he came through.

It wasn't until he got through the tight vents and had to slow to a crawl that he suddenly realized that he would have to walk right past Mollie's corpse. And wait, was the door even open? Well, surely Rambley could open it, but then he would get an eyeful of Mollie's... mess.

Ed really considered turning back, but he was too far to do that. He didn't even know if he'd be able to head back this way really. He steeled his nerves as he crawled the rest of the way and dropped into the hallway, fully anticipating to see a bloodbath.

The doors were open at the end of the hall so he did see the massive pool of dried blood spread across the tiled floor. The dried spray peppering the walls and memorializing the grizzly scene.

...But there was no body.

Ed crept up cautiously to look. No body whatsoever, and no bloody trail from it being dragged off. But something must've taken it, they just had to have moved it after it stopped gushing blood. The pool was noticeably bigger so it had its chance to leak most of its fluids.

Could Rambley have moved the body? Maybe, if he was going to be back here anyways, but he didn't really think he was capable of doing it. But Rambley had surprised him in the past, so maybe.

Thoroughly creeped out, Ed tried to step around the dried blood as best as he could and pressed on. Through the open doorway, down the stairs, and towards the Rookie Rangler security room.

He briefly looked down the hallway towards the Royal Ranglers Room. Mental note, needed to ask Rambley about that when he wasn't dealing with something like this. So, he headed to the security office.

Rambley briefly looked over with a start as the door opened, but upon seeing Ed coming in he sunk back into his chair, turning to face the desk again. He was quiet, thoroughly embarrassed.

Ed noticed- the silence was hard to ignore- and walked over to him.

“I was hoping I’d find you dressed up like a vampire,” he said.

“Heh. Oh, that. Yeah. Just something I found in the files,” Rambley mumbled. He unfurled himself from the chair and folded his arms on the desk. “Your phone’s right there.”

He pointed to it sitting on the desk. Ed picked it up and slid it into his pocket.

“I saw your stream. It was good,” Rambley mumbled.

“Thanks.”

Well, this was painfully awkward.

“...Are you okay? Nobody hurt you, right? Or tried to get in here?”

“I’m fine. I just...” Rambley sighed deeply. “You were right, Eddie. It was a bad idea.”

Ed stayed quiet, unsure what to say.

“I guess I got my hopes up,” Rambley muttered. “I was thinking it was going to be like our old Halloween parties, with games and fun... But I guess I was expecting something for kids. I don’t even know the first thing about being an adult and I am one! Those people online were right. Rambley the Raccoon was just targeted to a younger demographic.”

“Buddy, no. That’s not true. I liked your ideas.”

Rambley seemed unconvinced.

“Rambley, if I wanted to hang out with adults who acted like adults, I’d hang out at the bank.”

Rambley chuckled a little. He finally dared to look up at him, forcing a little smile.

“You always have my back, don’t you, Rangler?”

“Yeah.”

Ed put a hand on his shoulder. Rambley wiped his sweaty palm off on his leg and laid his hand on Ed’s, giving it a little squeeze.

“I’m sorry it didn’t work out,” Ed said honestly.

Rambley squeezed his hand again, a little tighter.

“Thank you for coming in and saving the day again. I don’t know what I would’ve done without you,” he said.

“Maybe called the cops for real?”

“Well, there’s that. Especially once they started throwing rocks at me.”

“...They threw rocks at you?”

“At my screen! Not at me. I’ve been safe down here.”

Huh. Ed still didn’t like that. Not one bit.

“But it’s a shame there’s not going to be a movie night now...”

Ed quirked a brow. “Why not? I’m not going anywhere.”

Rambley perked a little. “Are you sure? It might not be safe. What if they come back?”

“Then we’ll deal with it, but I don’t think anyone’s coming back.”

Rambley hoped not, and that in and of itself hurt. His first chance to have guests and it went like this. And the nice guests he did have he ran off trying to get rid of everyone else.

Happy Halloween indeed.

But he put on a smile once more.

“Then it sounds good to me! I could use a pick-me-up,” Rambley said. He hopped off the office chair and stretched. “What a night.”

He then got an idea and a little smile.

“Heeey, Buddy. Y’know, what do you think about maybe...”

He started to put his arms out, preparing to request a hug when he suddenly felt something. An alarm of some kind, something in the system, that made him recoil his hands and quickly unfocused to start checking what was up.

Ed noticed right away. “What’s up? Is someone still in the park?”

“No. It’s not that. I think...” Rambley’s eyes widened. “The doors...”

“The front gate?”

“No, the theater doors. They’re opened and... wait. Is Lloyd...?”

Ed could only watch as Rambley’s expression grew fearful.

“Oh no. Eddie, problem.”

...

After this fiasco, Laura couldn’t just drive off and leave Ed. Especially not when all of this was because of her party. If she had to take the heat for it then so be it, but she wasn’t leaving without him.

So, she waited in her car until she was the last one there. She couldn’t see where Ed parked, probably further back down the road. And she waited, and waited, for either Ed or the cops to show up. But neither did.

When Ed had first started telling that story about the cops, Laura had a suspicion he was lying. Ed wasn't great with cover stories and that one sounded like it was coming off the top of his head. But then Rambley chimed in and suddenly Ed had a lot more credibility, but now she was suspecting that maybe the two had been working together to clear the place out.

She couldn't be upset though. After Russ started breaking windows, she should've expected the party was going to fall apart. She just hoped everyone got home alright. She was completely sober and could've driven off at any time, but it felt wrong to do so. To bail and leave Ed here, even if he did lie about the police. IF he lied and didn't just see a cop and assume they were coming here.

Either way, Laura was getting antsy and decided to go find him. And clean up a little bit if it turned out the cops weren't coming.

She stopped by that door beside the gate to see if 'Rambley' was there, but much to her confusion she

found an abandoned registration office. One that looked like it had been barely used in years.

Obviously, this wasn't where he had been hiding away. He must've just been hanging out here waiting for Ed to show up. She headed inside of the park.

"Rambley?" she called to the screen as she headed inside. Rambley did not answer. Either he was distracted or snubbing her, and she wouldn't be shocked if it was the latter.

She got back to the café and to her disappointment and not really surprise, Ed was not there. She sighed and looked around at the plaza trying to think of where he had gone. It probably wasn't a good idea to wander around alone so she decided to pack up some of the food while waiting for him to come back. She could make a few trips to the car to pass the time.

And then she heard a bang.

She wasn't sure what it was at first, but the loudness of it mixed with the state of the park caused her to drop everything and rush out of the café to see. Thinking that maybe someone got hurt.

"Ed?!" she called as she ran out. She received no response.

Instead, she heard something like scratching and shuffling, banging, and she turned to look towards the Main Stage Theater entrance.

She couldn't see the doors from here, but she could hear the resounding bang and the rattling of the doors as they struggled to keep something inside.

That wasn't Ed. She knew that for certain, and she began to back away onto the street, stumbling over her feet and the curb. She considered making a break past the fountain, but before she could decide, and with an almighty bang, the doors failed and swung open.

Out came a giant, orange-furred beast. Lunging out of the freed doorway and onto the top of the steps. It shook out its tangled mane with irritation. It had paws and claws so enormous that she could make them out well even from a distance. Its eyes looked pitch black.

The beast looked like Lloyd, but not the cartoon character. Something more like a real life Lion- but not quite. No, more like something that had been taxidermized. The proportions were off, the movements seemed uncomfortable and clumsy, it was unreal. It didn't look like something that should've existed.

Just from the sight of it, Laura knew it wasn't a prank or anything of the like. Just the way it moved- it was a real creature. It was a monster.

But it hadn't seen her yet, so she tried to make a run for it. She wouldn't outrun it; she knew that much just from the size of it. Her only chance was to hide, and she ran into a restaurant on the other side of the street.

She quickly retreated into the dining room, hoping there would be a back door or stairs or anything, but it was a dead end. With nowhere else to run, she hid under the table at one of the booths.

She was in the process of trying to text Ed to warn him when she heard the thumps of its footsteps. She turned off her phone and held her breath. She could hear its claws clattering on the tiled floor as it stepped into the dining room. She could hear it breathing heavily through the low wall, or was it sniffing for her?

It was coming around the end. It was coming right for her.

She balled herself up into the corner and watched with wide-eyes and a hand over her mouth. It was so close that she could smell its pungent musk. She could see its paws come into view and noticed something rusty staining its fur. Was that blood? If it was then it was fresh. She gagged.

In that split second, the paw reached up and the claws hooked the underside of the table, and then violently flipped it with so much strength that the tabletop broke off the base and was flung over the low wall.

Laura screamed, still into her hand, and scrambled back as she stared into the face of the monster that cornered her. Its mouth stretched open in a roar, breath reeking of copper and bad meat, the emptiness in its inky eyes only broken by two vertical yellow slit-like pupils.

It only lasted for a second before-

A soft beeping came from somewhere. Something like an alarm or an alert. The beast recoiled and backed itself into the corner, throwing its head like it was in pain. It began to thrash, falling onto another table and breaking it in the process.

Laura didn't see what happened after that because she got up, jumped over the divider wall, and ran into the next room of the restaurant. The place had

largely collapsed in on itself, but it didn't look like the thing would be able to fit through. She climbed over the slabs of cement and into a tight corner in the back.

She was halfway back when she heard the beast's heavy footfalls as it bolted out of the restaurant and into the street, she assumed to look for her. But it soon bounded out of earshot, and she didn't hear it again.

It was while sitting in the back listening to her own heavy breathing that she realized the beeping noise had come from the Critter Cuff on her wrist.

She really hoped Ed had his on too. Speaking of him, she turned on her phone and sent a message before starting to climb back out of the rubble.

The last thing she wanted was to get anywhere near that thing, but if she had some sort of animal repelling alarm on her wrist then she needed to take advantage of it and get out of the park as fast as

possible. Hopefully while finding Ed and his friend in the process.

She peeked out of the open doors of the restaurant before creeping out. There was no sign of the creature.

“Hey.”

Laura’s head snapped over with a jump to see that the kiosk had alit again. Rambley’s face was on it, still in his vampire garb but clearly sulking. All the life sapped from his voice.

“He’s gone now. It’s safe for you to go,” he said.

He wouldn’t look her in the eye.

Despite being given the go-ahead, Laura instead crept over to the kiosk. She looked around quickly to see if anything heard them. Nothing did. The lion thing was gone.

“What was that?!” she whispered.

“...That was Lloyd,” Rambley muttered.

“Lloyd? No, I mean it looked like... What?”

“That was Lloyd. That’s the old Lloyd mascot.”

That was the- Well, it did sort of look like him, but- Wait, yeah. The mascots did have a sort of hyper-realistic look to them, right? She remembered Mollie looking a little too bird-like and that creepy Rambley mascot from the other day... That WAS Lloyd. That really was the old Lloyd mascot.

“Oh... my.... God.”

“Yeah, that sums it up. So, you should really be leaving now,” Rambley said.

“Wait a minute, I don’t understand. That’s the Lloyd mascot? Why’s he... What happened to him? Why’s he like an actual lion?”

Rambley huffed and crossed his arms. “Oh, now you want to talk? Well, it’s a little too late for that. See, I’m going to have to do a lot of cleaning tonight and I was really hoping to fall asleep before sunup,” he said. His tail flicked and his ear twitched in irritation.

It didn’t take a genius to realize he was upset. Though the party was the least of their problems now in her opinion.

“Wait, but what about- Okay, I’m sorry. I know the party got a little out of hand-.”

“A little out of hand? A little out of hand?!” Rambley was looking at her now, if only to shoot daggers. “People were breaking windows! And trying to break into the theater too! Do you realize what would’ve happened if those two... CLOWNS had gotten those doors open?!”

Well, now she did. Oh man, now she really did.

But Rambley wasn’t done. He was laying out all of his frustrations.

“I thought we were just going to have a fun Halloween Party! What happened to costume contests and bobbing for apples?! And who said anything about an open bar?!”

“I’m sorry, it wasn’t supposed to get this crazy! I’ll... I’ll pay to get the windows fixed!” Laura tried.

“This isn’t about windows. Though I CAN’T fix them, I don’t care about THEM. I care about ME!” Rambley pressed his hands to his chest. “D’you know what would’ve happened if they found me?! I was calling for you to help me, but you didn’t show up! If they would’ve found me, they could’ve...”

He huffed and dropped his head in his hands. He was totally overwhelmed. Laura could tell and she swallowed dryly, looking over her shoulder again. Still no Lloyd so she continued.

“I’m sorry. I really am. I didn’t want this to happen, I wanted us to have fun!”

“Then why did you do it? Why did you invite so many people and then let them go crazy?” Rambley asked. His voice cracked with hurt.

Even though she knew it was just some guy talking through an animated avatar, it was like she was being chastised by the actual Rambley the Raccoon himself. Surprisingly, it actually hurt her too.

“I... I don’t know. I don’t know, I just... I just was thinking that maybe if I got some friends here and we had a good time, maybe it would feel like it used to. Maybe we’d have fun and it’d be just like it was when we were kids, and the last memories I’d have of the park wouldn’t be it completely destroyed,” Laura confessed.

Rambley lifted his head to look at her. Laura felt compelled to continue.

“I don’t know how to explain it, but seeing this place abandoned and rundown just killed a part of my childhood. It wasn’t even that big a part of my childhood but seeing it like this... I don’t know what I

was thinking. It was stupid.” She was choking up, overwhelmed from everything. “I just thought I could bring it back for one night and it would replace all of this. And bring it all back to life. Bring back the magic.”

“...That’s what I thought too,” Rambley quietly admitted.

They sat there in a sad silence for a long minute.

“Let me make it up to you,” Laura pleaded. “Please. Look, I can clean this up. I can convince those guys to keep everything off the internet. Nobody will know what happened, I’ll get the windows fixed... It can work.”

She wasn’t sure how to make it work around the giant lion running around, but for now she stood by this promise.

And Rambley didn’t know what to think. Part of him wanted to blow her off and blow up, kick her out, and have that be it. But a little voice in the back of his

head piped up and he realized that like it or not, he knew she was being honest. He knew exactly what she meant.

Because it was the same reason he agreed to the party, wasn't it? It wasn't all her fault. He could blame her all he wanted, but he was the one who put himself in that position.

Rambley sighed as he considered his options. She was... ridiculous. This whole thing had been such a mess, especially since it was more his fault than hers. He let this happen. He gave her the reins to the party.

But he believed her. He believed that she really cared about the park, he could hear it in her voice. She loved this place. She just wanted to go back to when the fantasy was real. And a part of him wanted that to, wanted to live in that fantasy of Indigo Park being an escape into a world of wonder where cartoon characters came to life.

He knew what he wanted to do.

“You want to make it up to me?” he asked. A determined look in his eyes.

“Yes. You name it, I’m your woman.”

“...Ed’s coming to get you. When he gets there...”
Rambley looked away, ears and voice lowering. “Tell him to bring you by the treehouse. I might have a way to bring back the magic...”

“The treehouse?”

“He’ll know.”

“Okay...?”

That was an odd request, but Laura assumed that the security office was in some sort of treehouse. She couldn’t remember a treehouse though. Maybe in the forest area? Maybe it was a newer attraction.

She stood there tensely, looking around and making sure the hideous mascot wasn't creeping back up, but he seemed long gone.

Eventually Ed came sprinting down the street, much to Laura's relief. She met him with a hug.

"There you are! Thank God you're okay!" she said.

"I could say the same thing! What are you still doing here?"

"I was looking for you. And, well, grabbing the food. And then this- Lloyd showed up?"

Ed inhaled through his teeth and sent a wary look down the street. "Yeah, I heard about that... Come on, let's get you out of here."

"Actually, umm, I was talking with Rambley and he told me to tell you to bring me to the treehouse?" Laura said questioningly.

Ed almost drew a blank at that. “He what?” He couldn’t have.

“Told me to tell you to take me to the treehouse.”

He stared at her for a long second before the kiosk screen alit beside them.

“I did,” Rambley said.

He stared at the kiosk with a mix of shock and disbelief.

“Yeah, I know,” Rambley mumbled.

“Are you sure?”

“...Yes, I’m sure.” Rambley closed his eyes with finality and the screen went black.

Of all the impulsive decisions Rambley had made, this... still wasn’t as impulsively dangerous as the party, but it was still a pretty big decision to make seemingly out of nowhere. But he knew Rambley

had his reasons, and after seeing Lloyd it wasn't like he'd be getting out of this without answering questions anyway.

So, he nodded. "Alright. It's a little bit of a walk so let's get moving."

And they did. They started to walk through the park towards the treehouse.

During most of the walk they were silent. Laura shaken and Ed afraid that any attempt at conversation would lead to questions that he would eventually have to answer but was trying to put off.

Though putting them off didn't last forever. They were just approaching the square near the treehouse when Laura spoke.

"This is crazy..."

"I know," Ed agreed.

"Did you know?"

“About...?”

“About the mascot Lloyd monster running around?”

“...Yes.”

Laura shot him a downright aghast look. “Wait- Wait, was that why you were so freaked out the other day when you thought you saw something?”

“...Yes.”

“And you didn’t think it might be a good idea to tell me that before I threw a party?!”

“I... should’ve. I know I should’ve. That’s totally on me. But for the record, I told you not to throw a party.” But despite saying that, Ed did feel guilty. “I’m sorry. You’ll understand once we get to the treehouse. It’ll all make sense then.”

“It better, or so help me,” Laura fake-threatened.

But she was going to give him the benefit of a doubt and let him and Rambley explain what was going on.

And then she saw the treehouse, and it wasn't until they were walking up to the gate that she remembered where she recognized it from.

"Isn't this that house from that weird mascot Rambley video?"

Ed pointed out a sign on the gate. It read "Rambley Meet & Greet 9AM-11AM, 1PM-5PM. No flash photography!"

"It is!" Laura said.

Why would they be coming here? If that Lloyd mascot was running around, then who was to say that disturbing Rambley one wasn't here too? She wondered that before suddenly piecing a few things together.

What had Rambley said? If they had found me. What did he mean by that?

“Ed...” Laura said quietly. “Is that creepy Rambley mascot standing in there...?”

“No! The- That thing from the video? No, that thing’s... Well, I don’t know where it is, but I know it’s not here. Don’t even worry about it, it’s...”

Ed went quiet as the door started to open.

There, standing in the doorway, was none other than Rambley. Peeking out first before pushing the door open the rest of the way. He had changed out of his mo-cap suit and back into his traditional red handkerchief.

Laura’s eyes went as wide as saucers

“Hey there! I’m Rambley the Raccoon, the REAL raccoon, and well... here I am!” Rambley introduced. A little swing of his arm, a big smile, and currently swearing bullets that thankfully weren’t visibly animated. “Sorry to make you walk all this way, but I thought it’d be better if we could talk in person.”

Ed looked to Laura. The look on her face would've been funny in any other situation, but in this case, it looked like she was about to have a panic attack.

“Oh... Oh my God. My God, oh my God, oh-h my Good?” she sputtered out.

“I know this is a lot,” Ed said. He couldn't think of a good continuation. “...Don't freak out.”

Rambley discreetly checked in on her Critter Cuff and noticed that her pulse was skyrocketing to a dangerous degree.

She was afraid of him. He knew this was a possibility, but he had really hoped after Lloyd he wouldn't seem so scary. But then again, who could blame her after what happened with Lloyd?

And the longer she stared at him like that, the more anxious and self-conscious Rambley got. He had made a mistake. He shouldn't have done this. This was a horrible idea.

He put on a tighter smile and raised his hands in defense.

“It’s okay! Don’t you worry, I understand. I know this is... a lot to take in,” Rambley assured. His tail curled around himself as he took a careful step back towards his door. “I’ll just... go back inside.”

“No, wait!”

Laura was practically shaking now. “I’m okay! I’m okay, okay? I’m just... I-I’m just processing this. Don’t go,” she pleaded.

“I won’t! Take your time. I’m not going anywhere,” Rambley agreed. He stood fast right on his doorstep. “Heh, unless Lloyd shows up. Then we might have to skedaddle... That’s a joke. I don’t think he’ll show his face anytime soon. Just ignore me.”

It was still crazy to her. Lloyd was one thing- Lloyd was punctuated by a rush of adrenaline that sort of kept her from thinking too hard and even then, he

was some sort of bizarre animal. It would've been an entirely different matter if he strolled out in a vest and started chatting her up.

She was definitely having some sort of an anxiety attack, but there was no way she was leaving. Not now.

"I'm just- I'm just freaking out a little bit. But I'm okay! I'm not- I'm good. I can handle this," Laura babbled.

Ed took her hand, and she returned it by clamping his fingers in an unintended vice-grip.

"I... I canNOT believe this. Oh my God, Ed, Rambley the Raccoon is real," Laura sputtered. She looked to him, and he looked concerned for her but she knew in that second that like with Lloyd, he already knew. "How?"

"It's a long story," Ed said.

"And I'll tell you all about it!" Rambley volunteered. Laura looked back at him, and he gave her a

pleading smile. His hands clutched together until he gestured them to the door. “Why don’t you come inside? It’s completely safe! Ed’s been here, gosh, dozens of times. He’s even slept here! He practically sleeps here more than he does at home!”

Ed knew he was going to get some ribbing from that one later.

“Come on in. You don’t have to, but I’d really like it if you did,” Rambley said.

“Okay,” Laura said. She took a deep breath. “Yes, okay. Ed?”

“I’ll go first,” he offered. He led her inside, warning her about the low entrance. Rambley watching them with an excited, or more so relieved, smile.

“There you go! And again, welcome to my house! Glad to have you both.”

He looked outside carefully to make sure nothing was watching them before shutting and locking the door securely. Good, they wouldn't be interrupted.

Because he and Ed had a lot of explaining to do. Ed was especially thankful for the cozy feel of Rambley's house. If there was any place in the park comfortable enough to take in a lot of world-shattering information, it was here. And if there was any chance of her seeing Rambley as his cartoon counterpart, it would have to happen in his quaint, cartoon-accurate house.

"Why dontcha settle in on the couch? It's the best seat in the house!" Rambley suggested.

That seemed like a good place to start. Ed led Laura to the little couch and invited her to sit down. He kept holding Laura's hand to help give her a sense of security. He knew how overwhelming this could be.

Rambley kept his distance. Coming over into the living room and standing before the TV, making sure

to give Laura a wide berth. Or maybe it was for himself. He rubbed his hands together.

“So, where do we start? Oh! I know. So, I’m Rambley the Raccoon, like I said. The real Rambley the Raccoon, that is! I used to be part of the automated systems of the park but now I’m a cuddly mascot made for meet and greets and more. You can say Indigo Park really brought their beloved characters to life!” He giggled a little at his own pun, a tense ear twitch giving off subdued nervousness. “But don’t be afraid. I’m nothing like Lloyd. Some of the earlier mascots, well... they didn’t work out so well.” He looked aside sadly.

“So, you... you’re one hundred percent the perp-person who was talking to us through Rambley?” Laura asked.

“That’s right! I have a brain chip that allows me to access all the computers in- eh...” Rambley noticed Ed waving his hand in a sort of ‘tone it down’ manner. Okay, maybe too much for now. “Let’s just

say that I've got VIP access to the park and leave it at that."

"And there's no security guard."

"Nope! Well, no, that's not entirely true. Technically I would be the security guard, I suppose. But I've had the park to myself for a long time, so there hasn't been much to guard from."

"HE'S the guy you've been meeting?" Laura asked, looking to Ed for clarification.

"That's him," Ed said with a nod. Rambley grinned wider.

"Eddie's been a huge help with things around here! If it wasn't for him, we wouldn't even be able to use the front gate! And because we both love the park, we've decided that we're going to fix it up together and get it back on its feet. Which is why he comes by so often. We've already cleaned up the fountain!"

"Oh wow. That's a lot."

Laura clearly meant that all of this was a lot, but Rambley mistakenly assumed she meant the fountain. Which had, in fact, been a lot.

“Yup! And it looks great! We’re a team, Eddie and me. I’m his little ray of sunshine in these dark times and he’s the reason I get out of bed in the morning!... Oh, I’m just kidding! You can put that worried look away, Eddie,” Rambley said cheekily.

“And what’s the deal with Lloyd?” Laura asked.

“Like I said, something went wrong with the earlier mascots. They became... a little feral. It’s nothing really! I mean, it IS something, but nothing you need to worry about! Lloyd was probably just stirred up by the noise. And as long as you’re wearing your Critter Cuff, you’re as safe as can be!” Rambley patiently reiterated.

“Yeah, you said that. Sorry. I’m just kinda... this is all really, really...” Laura made a couple of random hand gestures. “You know?”

“I know. I ran into him my first night here. I was trying to get into Jetstream Junction and needed keys out of the back of the theater. I found him sleeping on stage before he ran into the back, right where I had to go. So, I went on back after him,” Ed explained.

“And you didn’t think of leaving?!”

“Kind of, but he ran away from me, so I thought maybe he was scared of me. And the whole place was full of stuff from back when Lloyd was the main mascot, so I couldn’t see where he was.”

Rambley’s smile faltered and he looked away momentarily.

“But then once I was about halfway through, Lloyd makes a lunge at me!” Ed mimicked the lunge and Laura visibly clenched. “But then a bunch of pallets and boxes and stuff falls on him and he runs off. I was already halfway there, so I get to the office, get the keys, and make my way back. I thought I lost

him. But then, he ran up and ambushed me at the door!”

“Typical Lloyd,” Rambley muttered.

“And he grabbed me-.”

“Wait, he grabbed you?” Rambley cut in, surprised.

Ed was a little surprised that he didn’t know. “I thought you were spying on me?”

“I was, but the room was full of junk! I didn’t see that part! I just heard him roar and I thought I got him before he got you!” Rambley sputtered.

“You did! I was fine, he just grabbed me by the arm right here.”

In a matter of moments Rambley looked angrier than he had ever seen him before. Angrier than the plush incident by far. He almost expected him to explode like he did then.

But he didn't. He kept his composure and kept it quiet. Maybe a little too quiet.

"Typical Lloyd," Rambley ground through his teeth.

Ed glanced to Laura who had her lips pursed in a way that showed that she noticed.

After a pause she asked, "Then what happened?"

"Oh right, sorry. So, Lloyd jumped me and my Critter Cuff went off, and that drove him off. I hadn't seen him since, but I guess it means he was hiding in the theater."

"He was," Rambley said. Still huffy and with his arms crossed.

"That's... so insane," Laura said, still reeling.

"...It is," Rambley sighed. All of steam dissipating with it as his ears and shoulders slouched, and he rubbed his arm sheepishly. "Look, I'm awfully sorry I yelled at you earlier, but maybe now you can see

why I got a little... upset. Especially after some of the guests started getting rowdy. They were trying to get into the theater before they started slinging rocks..."

At that, Laura seemed to suddenly clear up a little. Somewhat snapping out of her state of shock.

"No, it's okay! I deserved that. This isn't the first time things have gotten out of hand. But I didn't mean for it. I would have NEVER invited a bunch of people over here if I would've known you were... the real Rambley the Raccoon."

Rambley smiled at that.

And Laura looked to Ed. "Why didn't you tell me?" she asked.

"That's a good question! Eddie?"

And now they were both staring at him.

Well, it was worth being honest.

“Because he’s MY little buddy. Get your own.”

Laura rolled her eyes and Rambley snickered. “No really,” Laura said.

Ed took a deep breath and was even more honest.

“Because... I almost killed him with the flu a while back and thought it’d be best to not risk it... And I didn’t know how you’d take it.”

Rambley’s face softened sympathetically while Laura’s brows shot up.

“Are you kidding?! If you told me Rambley was alive my ass would’ve been down here in two seconds flat!”

Rambley giggled, looking happily flustered. “I take that as a compliment! Say, since you’re so excited to meet the real Rambley, I have an idea. Eddie asked me the first time we met face-to-face, and I don’t want you to be too shy to ask. Sooo...”

He took a cautious step forward and leaned in, his hands behind his back and his ears wiggling.

“Do you wanna pet my head?”

Laura was a little surprised but began to reach forward, only to stop herself.

“You’re sure?”

“Mm-hm!”

She stole a glance at Ed, he nodded reassuringly, and she finally reached out and patted him on the head. Rambley pulled a hand around to beckon her to put her hand back, closing his eyes contently as she patted him.

“See? I don’t bite!” Rambley said. He soaked up the attention like an eager sponge.

Laura was in shock. It felt too soft to be animal fur, but it still felt real.

“I can’t believe it... You’re real. You’re actually real.”

“I’m the real deal!” Rambley agreed.

Laura cracked a smile. “You’re so soft.”

“And I take very good care of my fur!” And then Rambley shot Ed a downright devious smirk. “Eddie can’t keep his hands off of me.”

He knew exactly what he was doing when he said that. That look made it clear.

Laura looked to Ed for clarification.

“He’s uh... He’s built for hugs,” Ed said.

“I am!” Rambley chirped with a toothy grin.

Laura looked at him almost hesitantly. “...Can I?”

“Yes.”

Rambley expected a cautious and tentative hug considering how careful she was being.

Instead, she nearly launched herself off the couch in the process of pulling him into a tight hug. He was nearly knocked off his feet by it but returned it eagerly.

It was different from his hug with Ed. It was tighter, her arms were thinner, and she smelled like sweet perfume. It was nice! It felt good.

And Rambley felt... fulfilled. Like he was doing what he was supposed to do. He looked to Ed with pride and adoration.

Ed had his phone out taking pictures.

He even caught a picture of the somewhat annoyed look Rambley shot him. He shot him a grin back.

Ed had been worried about them meeting for a long time. Having this moment was a huge weight off his shoulders, which is why he just stayed out of the

way and let them have it. The pictures were just a perk.

Laura squeezed Rambley a little longer, petting his soft back as she went on about how cuddly he was, before finally pulled away.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to squeeze you so hard,” she apologized.

“Don’t be! I haven’t had a good squeezing in a long time. I’m way overdue for one!” Rambley chirped. His tail flicking happily.

So, it looked like everything turned out alright. Crisis averted on all accounts and Ed for one couldn’t be happier. It was like a prolonged rollercoaster all night. The most effective Halloween scare he had in years.

But it was all over... So, what now?

“Well, I’m glad you two finally met. Now I don’t feel like I’m living a double life,” he said. “Soo, what now? What’s the plan?”

“Hmm, I guess we don’t have one anymore. But we sure have plenty of time to think of one!” Rambley chirped.

“What time is it?” Laura asked. She looked around for a clock but the one above the fake mantle was too far off to be right.

Ed checked his phone and Rambley unfocused momentarily to check.

“About midnight.” “Eleven fifty-four on the dot!”

Then came a long, silent, awkward beat.

“Are you sure? Maybe you should check again,” Laura joked.

Neither did. Ed giving her an unamused look while Rambley gave an embarrassed smile.

“But I guess it’s getting late. Maybe I should get going. Unless wait, is it safe to go out there at night with Lloyd running around?”

Laura looked at the window and Ed gave her an assuring shake of the shoulder.

“Don’t worry. Rambley’s right about the cuffs. If you’re under the cameras, they’ll work. And I’ll walk you out. I’ve walked either in or out of here every day for almost a month now and I only ran into Lloyd once,” Ed explained. Then shrugged and joked, “I’ve seen a lot worse than Lloyd.”

Laura’s head whipped around. “What else is here?”

Ed wouldn’t have even opened his mouth if he thought he was going to put his foot in it.

He fumbled, “I mean, Lloyd’s not the only mascot. There’s... There was Mollie, and Finley, but he’s-.”

“Oh, don’t you worry about them!” Rambley said with a nervous laugh. He then pointed a thumb to his chest proudly. “You’ve got ME looking out for you! So, as long as I’m here, you’re as safe as can be!”

Ed wasn’t so sure about this until he had a vivid recollection of Rambley beating away Finley with a broom. Maybe he did have a point. Heck, he’d probably tear right through Lloyd fueled on spite alone.

“But... are you sure you’ve got to leave so soon?” Rambley gave Laura and Ed both the biggest doe-eyes he could muster with his hands clasped pleadingly. “I know the party was a little bit of a bust, but we could have a party of our own! I have snacks and drinks; we could even play games! Whaddya say?”

Ed could’ve buckled instantly, so he looked to Laura to be the backbone.

“...Sure! Okay!”

And she couldn't resist.

Rambley was thrilled. "Really?! That's fantastic! Eddie, would you please put the water on? I'll go get the Connect Four and we can get started right away!"

Ed started to get up to go do so when Laura added, "There's still food back at the café..."

Rambley stopped in his tracks and spun on his heel.

"Oh right! I've been eyeing that smorgasbord all night, I can't believe I forgot!" he gushed.

How COULD he forget? That buffet had been on his mind all night! He could barely withhold his excitement.

"I can go get it. Or whatever I can carry," Ed offered, pointing a thumb at the door.

"You don't mind?"

“Wait! I wasn’t saying that!” Laura quickly interjected. “That- the Lloyd could still be hanging around down there. And you smelling like food isn’t going to help.”

“I’ve got this,” Ed said, confidently holding up his Critter Cuff.

“I know, but you alone with a lion? He got pretty close to me!”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m never alone, I’ve got him,” Ed said, pointing to Rambley. Rambley smiled brightly.

Laura didn’t look entirely convinced, but Rambley totally understood. After that run-in with Lloyd, who would feel comfortable walking around at night? But Ed was a different case. Nothing could take him down! Why, after how they handled that fraidy cat last time he would probably avoid Ed altogether!

...But Ed going all the way to the fountain- outside of the theater- to get it? Rambley would be watching him the whole time of course, ready and prepared

for anything!... But the door was right there, and that's likely where Lloyd was going to return to eventually...

"...You know what? Why don't we wait on that until later? Not that it's not totally safe, but we should give Lloyd a little time to cool down," Rambley suggested.

"You sure?" Ed asked.

He was sure. Though turning down all that food wasn't easy. The things he did for this guy!

"We'll just split some Rambley Rations- my treat!"

"What are Rambley Rations?" Laura asked.

"I'm glad you asked!"

And with that, Rambley gave a tour of his kitchen, his food, and then his bedroom when Laura asked, giving her the same tour that he had given Ed. Sans that he didn't take her into the basement. Ed noticed,

but just assumed it was either because he forgot or because of their limited time.

What then came was the in-home Halloween Party. Ed and Laura, in Indigo Park... getting beaten at Connect Four over and over again and eating bowls of Rambleberry flavored raccoon chow.

Needless to say, it made Rambley's night. He loved it. He loved the attention. He loved how just one extra person could make him feel so special. Not like an attraction to visit and take pictures with, but as a person with friends who wanted to hang out with him. He wished it could last all night.

Alas, Laura was clearly not used to staying up as late as Ed was. The occasional yawn gave it away.

"Time?" she eventually asked. Ed checked his phone again.

"Two-twelve."

“Yeah, I think it’s time to go. I’ve got to get up tomorrow morning.”

Ed’s brow shot up.

“I know. Shut up.”

“Aww, are you sure? If you’d like to stay the night, I can always make room! Eddie’s sort of taken the couch, but I could make you a comfy little floor bed. I have, gosh, so many sheets and blankets and pillows. It’ll be like sleeping on a cloud!” Rambley said.

“I wish I could. Believe me, I don’t want to go hike through the dark, but I won’t have time to get ready. But I’ll come back!”

“You will?”

“Definitely!”

“Well, okay. But just know I’ll be counting the days until you’re back!” Rambley said sweetly.

“What about Ed?” Laura asked, sending Ed a sly smile.

“Oh, he’s not going anywhere,” Rambley said with a dismissive wave.

“But I am going to walk you to your car. It’ll give me a few minutes to charge my phone. That okay?” Ed asked, looking to Rambley.

“That’s more than okay! Especially since I was the one who ran down the charge, heh.” He gave an apologetic smile. “But I’ll have my eye on you two, so no worries!”

As Laura stood up, Rambley took a little breath and boldly stepped forward to take her hands in his. She let him, and he smiled up at her.

“It was so nice to finally meet you,” he said happily.

“You too,” Laura said. She got a softer smile. “In a way I’ve sort of been waiting my whole life. Or at

least since I was a kid. Sorry it was sort of a messy meeting.”

“It’s all water under the bridge.”

It was hard to pull them apart, so Ed just waited patiently as they finished up their goodbyes and soon, they were out the door and heading towards the gate.

“I’ll see you soon!” Rambley called after them with a wave. Then he shut the door, maybe a little quicker than Ed would’ve expected.

The two started out of the square and back towards main street.

“You’re really planning on staying the night with Lloyd running around?”

“Sure. If it’s safe enough for Rambley, it’s safe enough for me. Besides, up until tonight I thought Lloyd could’ve come out of there at any time and just didn’t.”

And now he could, Ed realized. That was a scary thought. Better not think about it when he still had two trips past the theater to look forward to.

“So, what did you think of him?” Ed asked.

“He’s so sweet!” Laura gushed. “I can’t even- He’s just a big ball of fluff!”

“He is. Just a big talking plushie,” Ed agreed with a smile. “But he gets pretty lonely.”

“I could tell! Poor guy. How often do you visit?”

“Eh, every other day.”

“Every other day?! You’ve been working that much?! I’m shocked you can move!”

“We don’t work every day. To tell you the truth, most of the time we just hang out and watch videos on my phone and play games... Don’t give me that look,” Ed sighed.

Laura had a smile that matched her slightly smeared cat face paint perfectly.

“I’m not saying anything,” she said. “But I think it’s really cute that you come down here and hang out with him.”

“Just to let you know, but he’s probably listening,” Ed forewarned.

“What’d I say?”

“Nothing yet, but it’s a long walk.”

Laura rolled her eyes yet again.

But as they got closer to main street, Laura fell quiet. Ed understood, he didn’t feel like talking either with Lloyd possibly wandering around. Despite how he shrugged it off, he felt a slight anxious pressure building in his chest.

Deep breaths, he was fine. Rambley was always watching. Lloyd was just a scared animal.

They made it back to the theater to find that the doors were still open, but there was no sign or sound of Lloyd, so they hurried into the café and got to work.

They worked to get the food trays closed and stacked up in a way that didn't crush them. Laura dumped the now watered down punch out and shoved the bowl in a bag she left, packing up most of everything else in a separate bag, and grabbed the jug. Ed closed and grabbed the cooler, and they started their way back to the cars.

And reached the tunnel before they realized the difficulty before them.

"...I don't suppose there's a secret way around?"

"We could take a shortcut through the railroad, but we'd still have the second blockade to worry about."

Laura hummed. She stared at the wall of rocks for a long moment before looking back at Ed.

“Do you think you could carry the trays by yourself?”

“You want to switch for the cooler?” Ed offered.

“Actually, I was thinking maybe you could put them somewhere and pick them up when you were heading back, and then give them to Rambley.”

“Are you sure? This is a lot of food.”

“Sure! I can make more. Besides, he’s a skinny baby. He needs more than that raccoon food.”

“You felt the...?” Ed gestured to his back.

“Oh yeah.”

“Thanks! He’ll really appreciate it.” Ed knew that he would. Popcorn alone wouldn’t sustain anyone.

“Wait, he doesn’t have a fridge.”

“It’ll be fine! There’s not that many of the eggs left. I don’t know who got into them, but there’s like seven there. The marshmallows will last.”

Good point. Ed stacked the stuff up and took it into the Rambley Railroad gift shop before hiding it behind the counter.

Now with much less to carry, the two made it over the first wall of rubble a little easier. Ed went first in case Lloyd popped up but found the tunnel empty. Laura followed down behind him, with Ed offering the arm holding the jug for her to grab onto on the way down.

She stepped down into the tunnel and they began to cautiously walk through.

And then Rambley suddenly appeared on the screen beside them.

“Hey! One more thing!”

Laura jumped with a shout.

“Oh, sorry! I didn’t mean to scare you! I just wanted to catch you before you left,” Rambley apologized. His hands tented together. “I was just thinking that you’ve spent a good amount of time in Indigo Park for the last couple of days, haven’t you?”

“Pretty much,” Ed joked.

“Oh, I know you have,” Rambley retorted playfully.

“Y-Yeah, I’d say so,” Laura agreed.

“And so would I! I know you need to get going but before you do...” He got an eager little smile. “How about giving me a few minutes for a Rambley Review?”

Ed wasn’t expecting to hear that brought up again.

He was familiar with the Rambley Review. It was what kept him from running off after Mollie had chased him down and had gotten herself killed.

There he was preparing to walk into Oceanic Odyssey when he saw Finley for the first time, and decided that he needed a second to sit down before he passed out. And a second to figure out how to get out of there.

But then came Rambley to give him the Rambley Review, which was less of a review and more a little performance on the fly. A funny little song laced with undertones of begging him to stay. A bunch of hopeful words covering a whole lot of desperation. Rambley putting himself on display.

It was what kept Ed from leaving with then. It was what encouraged him to hold out until he ended up finding Rambley himself, which drastically changed things. It was hard not to be somewhat nostalgic for it even when it didn't happen more than a few weeks ago.

Laura seemed curious. "Depends! What is it?"

"Why, I'm glad you asked! It goes something like this..."

Music had begun to fade in when he started talking and reached its peak then. Rambley hopped back from the screen and held his arms up to the Indigo Park logo that dropped in above him.

“Thanks for visiting Indigo Park! I hope your stay went well~!” He popped his hands on his hips. “If you don’t mind rambling with me, then why not stay for a spell~?”

The Indigo Park logo slid to the left and off screen as in from the right slid in various pictures of the park. They were comparisons shots. First showing pictures of the attractions at the park, then showing pictures of the same attractions in current day, clearly having been taken from the cameras.

“The park’s been going through changes, and it’s strange, I can tell. But if you could share your experience quick, that would really help!~”

Rambley flickered to the left side of the screen and on the right appeared a question with a yes or no check mark.

“Were you satisfied with the service?~”

“Yes,” Laura volunteered.

A checkmark appeared and the question was replaced with another one.

“Did the mascots make you nervous?~”

“Umm... no?”

“That’s great!”

The yes or no option disappeared as three questions popped up in quicker succession.

“Did you have a good time? Did you relax and unwind? Did you feel like you did when you were a kid?~” Rambley clasped his hands together. “I really hope you did.”

And then in a surreal beat, the questions were suddenly replaced with a picture. A picture of two kids riding on what looked to be a log ride, likely from the Pirate Bay. They recognized it as themselves.

“Is that us?! Oh my God, it is! That’s us!” Laura asked. She was surprised but thrilled, not noticing or considering the implications of Rambley being able of locating their pictures from years.

Considering that this wasn’t the first picture Rambley dug up of him, Ed wasn’t that surprised.

The picture was then replaced with another. This being a random photo of another family on a boat, which looked to maybe be near the lagoon area. Then another on the railroad, then some kids riding Rooftop Races, and more kept coming. Snapshots of dozens of happy families who had once visited Indigo Park and who were now saved forever in the databanks.

And while they looked at the pictures, Rambley kept singing.

“At Indigo Park, things are not what they seem. They’re not quite what they’re supposed to be. This is just the start, but maybe if we try, we might just make things right! Again.~

At Indigo Park, there is a spark of hope. There’s still so many acts left in this show! But it’s just a start, so if we all pull together, we can build it even better than ever!~”

The pictures rolled out and the camera returned in on Rambley.

“And then the fun doesn’t have to end... If you feel like a little volunteer work, I mean! I know you’re probably busy, and tired. So, here’s an abridged review for time! Because yours is as important as mine!”

He began to do a little dance on the screen. A shimmy here, a swish of his tail there.

“I don’t want you feeling stuck, or in a funk ‘cause of me. Because when you’re here at Indigo Park, we want you the happiest you can be!”

Rambley made a little heart with his hands over his chest.

“At Indigo Park, there is a heart still beating, waiting to hear another’s beat back...”

There was a small pause. The music still played, but Rambley briefly trailed off. Almost like he lost his train of thought.

The screen glitched out. Something it hadn’t done in a long while.

Then it clipped right back to Rambley’s face as though nothing had changed. Nothing except that Rambley was now sing-racing with the music.

“And now that we’ve patched up, you should know- I get pretty attached! But you’re good to go. But please come back if you can, if you want to give us a

hand, we'll never say no! The door is open, so I'm really hopin' you'll give us a chance. Just saying in advance!~”

He huffed like he was catching his breath before quickly recovering with a big smile.

“Guess there’s still a little Indigo magic left, hmm? Well, I guess it’s about time I cut you loose. Happy Halloween, you two, and come back soon!”

And with a wave the screen went black.

Needless to say, Laura clapped. And once she did it felt weird not to, so Ed did too.

But then he started reading different into the performance. It was a far cry from the initial review and the lyrics weren’t the only thing that changed.

Rambley’s desperate pleading in the original had been scrubbed away and though there was still a big focus on rebuilding the part, there was something

more hopeful about it. Maybe because he was no longer begging and hinting for Ed to stay.

Ed wondered if it was just because it was aimed towards Laura, but he really hoped it was because Rambley knew he didn't have to beg anymore. Because he knew that he wasn't on his own anymore.

“He's the reason I get out of bed in the morning!”

It was sad, but also there was something about it that left a warm and fuzzy feeling in Ed's chest. He knew he had to be grinning like a goof as he continued off with Laura, who was still gushing about the 'IRL Indigo Films Song Number' that had been dropped on them. Not even the actual paid mascots could've or would've pulled that off.

It wasn't too long after that they made it out of the gates. Ed turned around expecting Rambley to appear on the screens, but he didn't. Not thinking too much of it, Ed turned ahead and walked Laura to her car.

They didn't say goodbye, with Laura instead saying she was going to turn around. Ed then jogged down to his car to get a jumpstart on the charging. Soon afterwards, Laura started driving down towards him, and he pulled his door closed and rolled his window down, with her following suit.

"Okay, I didn't want to ask because you said he was probably listening..." Laura began. "...Does he think you guys are really going to be able to rebuild the park alone?"

Ed gave an almost defeated nod.

"Ed, I don't think that's going to work. I mean, obviously there's... I don't need to tell you," Laura realized.

"No, I know," Ed agreed.

"...So, what's the plan then? What're you going to do?"

Ed sighed and rested his arms on the steering wheel.

“I don’t know. Rambley says a lot of this is automated and he’s convinced we can fix it, but I don’t know how much of that is him knowing something I don’t and how much is just optimism... Or maybe he knows and just doesn’t want to believe it. All I know is that there’s no way I’m going to tell him no. This park is all he has.”

“But with Lloyd running around and the way stuff’s falling apart? How have you not just taken him home by now? I’d take him home tonight if he’ll go!”

But there was the million-dollar question. Would he go?

“I... I haven’t offered yet,” Ed admitted. He rubbed the back of his head. “I’d take him home in a heartbeat, but there’s just so much that goes with it. It would mean asking him to leave his home, the park, everything he has and then go to my little

apartment where someone could see him, and he could get sick again. He's fragile."

"Of course he is. His immune system is probably compromised, he's living off dog food, and who knows about the water quality. It'd be one thing if he was a real raccoon living out in the wild- I don't even think a real raccoon would be able to survive in this environment."

"I know, and that scares me." Ed chuckled and cracked a smile. "I've sort of gotten attached."

"I could tell," Laura said, flashing a smile. Though it then softened. "Just... keep it in mind, okay? I wouldn't force him out either, but at least let him know there's a backup plan."

"I will. But I think he knows I've got his back."

"...Don't tell him about the dog food thing?" Laura asked with a guilty smile.

"No problem."

There was a brief pause.

“Want me to stick around until you’re done charging?” Laura offered.

“No, it’s cool. It’s late, you’re tired, and I don’t want you driving any later than this. I’ll be fine.”

“Okay, but I’m leaving my phone on, and I want you to call me if anything happens,” Laura instructed. She finally started to drive off, calling out before she did. “Be careful! And take care of that little guy or I’m taking him home!”

“Over my dead body!”

Ed joked back. Only afterwards sort of inwardly cringing. Probably the worst time ever to bring up death.

Ah well. He rolled up the window and reached into the backseat and grabbed the bag of popcorn balls. He tore it open and fished out one of the

prepackaged balls before opening it and biting in. With all the party food he didn't have to worry about having one or two of these while he waited. Gave him something to do at least, other than think.

He inadvertently chuckled as his mind went back to Rambley's little dance. That was the same little dance he had done back at the aquarium. He understood why he did it now too. That quirky jig was perfect for a cartoon character. He had probably done it dozens of times on the screen and defaulted to it in real life.

Just Rambley being Rambley.

Thank God he was okay.

Ed sunk into his driver's seat as he munched at the popcorn ball. What a night! They just barely skirted disaster tonight... Well, maybe. Lloyd was out there somewhere and now there was the chance of any of the partygoers trying to sneak back into the park. At the very least, nobody saw Rambley and now Laura was aware of the situation.

It was a good thing Laura knew about everything now. Now he knew that if anything happened to him, Rambley would be taken care of.

...Boy, that was a depressing thought. Better not tell Rambley.

Anyway, he really seemed to warm up to Laura. That in and of itself was a miracle considering how the party went and how upset he had been earlier, but all was forgiven.

Which was a good thing. Rambley needed friends. He needed bonds, and distractions, and things other than just the park-

There was another reason Ed didn't directly ask if Rambley wanted to come home. Because he had a suspicion the moment he did, if he didn't word it perfectly, it would give away his doubts. Not general skepticism doubts, but his true doubts. Showing exactly where his true loyalty lay, not in the park but in the park's sole caregiver.

Not that he had given up on the park- he still thought it was worth a shot! He was going to give it his all in bringing this place back to its former glory, he would work his hands to the bone and come back every day, and do it with a smile, but there was only so much they could do.

But how was the guy who got him out of bed in the morning supposed to tell his little ball of sunshine that Indigo Park was never going to be how he remembered it ever again?

...This was too much to unpack at 2AM on Halloween while sitting in his car waiting for his cell phone to charge. That was something for a much more awake Ed to deal with.

He sighed and checked his phone. It hadn't even been five minutes. He'd give it about ten or fifteen more and head back. That should be enough to get through a movie or two.

And as for Indigo Park, the only way Ed was getting out of this without breaking Rambley's heart would be getting his friends back. They could worry about everything else after that.

...Except for Lloyd. He would probably be worrying about Lloyd for a while.

...

Even though the get together ended and Rambley was currently alone, he was feeling pretty good!

He came out of his review feeling giddy in a way he hadn't after the first one and was positively buzzing, humming as he removed his suit again and folded it up neatly.

The nerves were still there, tight in his belly, but he felt great. He had made another friend! Sure, she might've been a bad influence who led him down a primrose path of candy and broken glass, but she was pretty nice once she realized her mistake. She even went out of her way to apologize! And the way

she played Connect Four- she really did remind him a little of Mollie.

Of course, she could never replace his Moll, but still!

It also made Rambley feel a little less bad about keeping Ed all to himself. Now that his other bestie was on board, he could keep Ed around as much as he wanted without any guilt whatsoever!

Maybe they could have her over sometime to help decorate too! It would be nice having another eager pair of hands around.

But that was for some other time. Tonight was all about him, Ed, a scary movie, and a party's worth of Halloween shaped finger foods. Needless to say, he was looking forward to it-!

Thack!

A cracking sound interrupted Rambley's thoughts and he snapped his head to the window. What was-?

Another crackling sound, but this time he saw the source. It was a rock bouncing off one of his windows. Then another, and another in rapid succession.

Rambley's heart leapt into his throat. Was that those two hooligans? Had they stuck around? Oh no, did they see him?!

Rambley dashed over and hid behind his bedroom sheets as the rock barrage continued for a few more seconds before falling eerily silent. His heart was pounding as he struggled to focus and finally got ahold of the cameras.

If this was those two guys, then he was in serious trouble. They could hurt him. They could hurt Eddie. They could tell everyone about the state of the park!

He switched to the camera that looked towards his front door expecting to see the two men standing outside throwing rocks. But he didn't. All he could see was something in front of the door, set up so

that he would've seen it if he opened the door. It was a character cutout.

And then he recognized which cutout it was.

With nothing more than a gasp, Rambley bolted out from behind the sheets, yanked open his trap door, and dropped into the basement while pulling it shut behind him.

This was not good. In fact, this was even worse than those two guys. This was about to be a disaster.

But the front door was locked and as long as he could hide down here, he would surely be safe. Ed and Laura were sitting ducks though- or walking ducks- if they hadn't left the park yet.

He had to warn them. He secured the trap door before climbing into the dark corner behind it, where if anyone looked in they would likely not see him.

Then he started to connect back into the systems. He switched to the gate to see if they were there. He

could see Laura's car in the distance, but it didn't look like anyone was inside. Where were they? The bathrooms? Of all the times for a bathroom break- there weren't even cameras in there! Maybe he could see from the tunnel.

But then his ear twitched as he picked up a faint noise.

Clink. Clink. Clatter. Hissss .

His eyes focused through the darkness and zeroed in on the metal canister that had been tossed in through the basement vent. He knew what it was even before the invisible gas spraying from it hit his nose.

Indigo Park's own Indigo Park Sleepytime Sedation Spray for Mascots & More. He recognized the chemical odor instantly and without a second to waste rushed back to the trapdoor.

But he was engulfed by it. It filled the basement in seconds and despite trying to hold his breath it

somehow crept in, burning his nose and lungs. He could feel the tingling even before he began to lift the now ten times heavier trap door. But he got it open and in two struggling pulls managed to get out of the basement.

He didn't get any further than that though. Collapsing onto the wooden floor of his home as everything felt tingly and warm, and numb.

And then it was lights out. Once Ed was sure that his phone charged enough to be sustainable for a few hours, he unplugged it, got out of his car, and began to head back. Only stopping by the railroad to get the trays of food on his way.

A dull rustle came from the direction of the railroad.

Ed shot up abruptly and listened. He listened for a long minute, trying to pick up any sound, but there weren't any. None of Lloyd's loud plodding footsteps either, but that didn't mean he wasn't there.

In the slim chance that Lloyd decided to act like an actual predator and was creeping around, Ed got out of there quickly.

It didn't take long to get back to the treehouse, but he did notice on his way there that Rambley was being a little quieter than usual. He shrugged it off. He was probably getting things ready or changing out of his suit or something.

Or that's what he thought until he walked up to the treehouse and found something amiss.

First of all, the front door was open and Rambley wasn't standing there waiting for him. That was weird enough, but something was laying on the ground outside.

It was a cut-out lying face down. He recognized the shape as being a Salem the Skunk, which was odd as well as he hadn't seen a single Salem cut-out other than the broken one at the railroad. He nudged it with his foot before looking towards the door.

“Rambley?” he called.

There was no answer.

He stepped inside to find the lights on but Rambley nowhere to be seen. The trapdoor was also left propped open. That was very weird.

“Rambley, buddy?” Ed called again.

He was becoming increasingly concerned the longer he went without a response.

He hastily dropped the trays on the couch and hurried over to the trap door. He was hoping that Rambley had headed downstairs and left the doors open so that Ed would follow. Maybe he was playing a Halloween prank or something- he did have a little bit of a mischievous streak.

Yet when he dropped in and crouched down, he was met by darkness and a strange smell. It was a weird chemical smell, one that immediately rushed to his head like he was sniffing a container of varnish. He

hastily stood back up to catch his breath. Then he turned his flashlight on, ducked down while holding his breath, and shined the light around to see if Rambley was down there.

Nothing. He was pretty relieved that Rambley wasn't passed out in a gassed-up basement, but the lack of the raccoon was very concerning. He climbed out quickly and continued searching.

Not in his bedroom. Though there were his suit and cap.

Not in his bathroom. It was entirely empty.

There was nowhere else. Rambley wasn't in the house, he must've left.

Ed hurried back outside and looked around for any sign of him. Nothing.

"Rambley!" he called through cupped hands.

"Rambley, are you out there?!"

He was, somewhere, but he didn't know where.
Unless...

He looked down at his only clue, the Salem cutout laying at his feet. He remembered what Rambley had said about them, his subtle warnings, and Ed had a hunch.

“Hang on, Buddy. I'm coming.”

...

Rambley was brought out of empty darkness by a sharp ammonia smell. He retched and twisted his head away, scrunching up his nose. It still took him a few moments more to wake enough to start thinking.

He groaned and groggily opened his eyes. The world was hazy, dark, and splotchy, and his head felt like it weighed one hundred pounds. He tried to reach up for it only to realize he couldn't move his arms.

Something was stuck around him. At first, he mistakenly thought he was in bed, tangled in his sheets, but whatever was holding him wasn't just too rough but was also not letting go. He forced his eyes open again and struggled to blink through the blur and looked down at himself. He saw red, blue, green ropes or bands

...No, wait. They were bungee cords! Connected and looped and secured together. His arms trapped crisscross across his front. The cords seemed to be attached to something behind him, something hard that he was laying on. Hard enough that he could feel it through his tail. He looked to the side and noticed railroad tracks. Was he lying on the railroad tracks?

Wait... Was he tied down to HIS railroad tracks?!

His brain woke up faster than the rest of his body wanted to as he tried to wiggle free. His ankles too were held tight. He was totally wound up and strapped down, and from what he could recognize he was definitely in the destroyed section of his

railroad. If the darkness didn't give it away. The smell of mold might've, but all he could smell was a strong perfumy smell.

But now he was beginning to panic.

"Hello! Ed?! Eddie?! Anybody there?!" he yelled.

He heard a whistle directly above his head.

"Up here."

Oh no. That voice.

Rambley slowly lifted his head and came face to face with the last person he wanted to see.

They stood right behind him, right above his head. Their long, thick legs clad in dark tights torn on the knees and scuffed at the ankle. A belt wrapped around its slender waist and resting on its hip held a couple of small canisters, a squirt bottle filled with some sort of funky yellowed liquid, and a spray can. And then what looked like a little pill bottle they

closed in their hand and then slotted into one of the free spaces.

They wore a cracked and aged leather-looking vest of deep indigo, with a pink-red collar circling their neck. They wore long yellow gloves that went to their elbows- not the ones they were supposed to wear, but hazardous material gloves used by certain staff members. Explaining why they didn't match anything on them. Well, except their eye.

A yellow eye with a pink-red iris peered down at him. Only one, as the other was entirely hidden by the bang of their dark purple coif, of which there was a faded red-pink streak jutting through it. Their short hair falling almost to their neck and almost reaching their collar.

Their fur was dark purple with some lighter purple accents, including a streak down their tail. A tail of rough, patchy fur that had weathered harsher conditions than Rambley's own.

Yet not only did they stand tall over him, but they looked as smug as ever. They placed one foot on the railing beside his head and leaned into it. Their arms crossed on their chest as they shot him a toothy smirk.

“Long time no see, Dumpster Face,” Salem greeted.

Oh no, OH NO.

Rambley couldn't let them know he was freaking out. So, he tried to swallow his internal panic, forcing a bored look to cover the fear that they had already seen.

“H-Heyyy, Salem. I didn't recognize you from the ten gallons of cheap perfume you're wearing. Where'd you get it?”

“I make it myself. We don't all have to go diggin' around in the trash like a greedy little rodent to get what we want,” Salem retorted. “Maybe I'll even lend ya a little for the next time you go divin' for dinner.”

Their smirk didn't budge for a second. They didn't buy his act, but that made Rambley even more determined to keep it up.

"Funny. Can you untie me now? I'm not really in the mood to play the whole hero and villain thing," he said flatly.

"You ain't? Guess that's 'cause you had such a big night, haven't cha? Must be real hard lettin' that many people walk all over ya." They reached down and pinched his fluffy cheek, shaking it. "Cookskin rug or professional doormat?"

"Get off of me!"

"I'm gonna say doormat."

Rambley huffed and turned his head away, but even that felt wavey and weird. Like he was awake, but his body wasn't.

He groaned. "Ugh, what do you want?"

“I’m just keeping the fun going, Buddy.”

The way they said that through their teeth suddenly alerted Rambley to the fact that this was more than an elaborate prank.

He shrunk into himself.

“Now, I know how much you love dumb little party games. Indigo knows you didn’t shut up about them,” Salem continued, patting his head in a patronizing way.

Rambley’s eyes widened. How long had they been listening?

“So, I thought, ‘hey, what the heck?’ Howzabout you and me play a game just like old times? Y’know, since yer so lonely that you felt like- oh, I don’t know- inviting a whole town full’a eye witnesses to come tear up the place,” they spat the end. Their eyes narrowing just a little. “But hey, if you’re gonna air out all your dirty laundry with yer boyfriend, then why not show it off to the whole world, eh?”

“Sh-Shut up!” Rambley squeaked.

“Don’t tempt me. I’ll walk off and leave your fuzzy ass on these tracks.” Rambley gritted his teeth and Salem looked at their claws. “So, what’s the plan, Little Man? Gametime or naptime?”

“Nap- You’re going to poison me again?!”

“Nah, I gotta save this stuff.” They tapped the canister. “But I don’t know what else you plan on doing down there.”

Rambley closed his eyes and took a deep breath. His heart was pounding in fear and frustration, and due to the strain of his overwhelming malaise. It’s hard to even think straight, let alone think of a plan on how to escape. He swallowed thickly and opened his eyes to see that smirk again, and his ears lowered with self-consciousness.

“How do you play the game?”

“There ya go. For starters, we need another player. I’m gonna need you to get on a screen and flag down yer bodyguard.”

Rambley rolled his eyes. “Can you untie me first?” he grumbled.

“Nah. And chop-chop. Lloyd’s still running loose.”

That sent a fearful shiver down Rambley’s spine and he tried to unfocus enough to connect with the system and look for Ed, but he was struggling.

It was hazy, always just out of his grasp. Like if he was reaching for something with an arm that was asleep.

“Tick-tock, Fuzzy.”

“Ugh, I’m trying! Y’know, if you wanted me to have a clear head then maybe you shouldn’t have knocked me out with a bunch of gas!”

“Only way to shut you up long enough to get you over here.”

Rambley huffed and tried to focus again. This time he was able to hook on, maybe out of a mix of desperation and spite. He looked through the camera at the gate. Nobody was there. He checked the camera outside of his house. Still nothing.

Had he left? Was he still in his car? Rambley knew he should've hoped that he had gotten away somehow, but he was growing increasingly frantic. Still having trouble focusing, he switched to the method of tracking Critter Cuffs. The only active cuff in the park was Ed's, so it was able to track him down.

And it pinned Ed down to being smack out on the other side of main street for whatever reason. Something that made Rambley instantly blanch.

He was now sporting a sharp headache above his eyebrow as he barely managed to track down a kiosk on the path ahead of him and hooked on.

Thankfully, connecting to the screen somewhat numbed him to the gross feeling throughout his entire body.

“Eddie!” he called. “Eddie, over here! I’m over here!”

Ed was running through the dark with only a flashlight to guide him when he heard Rambley’s yell. He broke into a sprint towards his voice.

He never expected to hear him and for a second, he wondered if he had made a mistake running off to look for him. But that didn’t matter, he was just glad to hear him. He raced up to the kiosk.

“You have no idea how good it is to hear your voice right now,” he panted, smiling.

But Rambley had a weary frown. Ed noticed this immediately.

“What’s wrong? Where are you?” he asked.

“...Buddy?”

“You’re not going to believe this...” Rambley sighed.
“But I’ve been kidnapped by Salem the Skunk.”

And in an instant, any of Ed’s hope that this was a miscommunication was dashed.

“Tell ‘em I said hi,” Salem butted in.

“Ugh. They said hi,” Rambley muttered disgruntledly.

“Uh... hey,” Ed said dumbly.

“Sooo, this is not good,” Rambley said nervously.

“Wh-Where are you? I mean, I know where you are, but what are you doing out there?”

“I’m, uh... on the way to Spoiled Swamp.”

Rambley’s brows raised abruptly. Okay, so apparently Ed figured out some of what happened. He cracked a smile.

“You were on the right track! Well, sort of. I’m at the railroad.”

“Your railroad?”

“Yup. And *sigh* currently tired to the tracks.” Ed looked alarmed while Rambley was unenthused.
“Mm-hm.”

“Okay, butterball, it’s go time,” Salem spoke up.

They walked over and hopped up to sit on a large piece of the fallen ceiling, pulling their tail aside to flick beside them. Rambley had to crane his head back just to see them, looking annoyed the whole time. Salem pointed at him.

“Repeat exactly what I say, got it?”

“Fine,” Rambley mumbled.

“I’ve gotcha strapped down to the tracks.”

“He already knows that.”

“Tell him.”

Rambley huffed impatiently again. “I’m strapped down to the railroad tracks,” he recited- through the screen to Ed.

“And the train’s back at the station,” Salem said.

“And the train’s back at the station.”

“But it’s not gonna stay there long.”

“But it’s... not going to stay there long?”

“Once I start the ride, that train’s gonna chug its way down here making every stop on the way. Including a stop right. About. There.”

Salem pointed at Rambley again. It was at that moment that Rambley put two and two together and realized what they were implying. His eyes going wide as saucers.

“Go on. Tell him.”

“S-Salem’s going to try and run me over with the train,” Rambley babbled out.

“Now that wasn’t exactly what I said. Left out a lot of details, but I’ll let it fly. SO, he’s got five minutes starting when I say ‘go’ to get down here and when that timer’s up, this ride’s going on,” Salem explained. “You tell him he better start running.”

“Salem says you’ve got five minutes to get down here!” Rambley choked out.

Ed was just watching the screen in silent horror as Rambley kept going from a look of absolute fear to a blank ‘loading’ expression as he got more orders from Salem. And it seemed like each one was worse than the last.

There was no way he could get back to Rambley Railroad in five minutes. Maybe if he ran as fast as he could, maybe if the ride bought a little more time, maybe, barely-

“WAIT! Wait! The train has a safety feature! It’ll stop if someone’s on the tracks?!” Rambley desperately shouted. Not necessarily at Ed, but at Salem, challenging them, clinging to that slim hope that he remembered a loophole out of this.

“It used to have that, didn’t it?” Salem grinned.
“Think it still does?”

Oh right. This was Salem he was talking about.

Rambley promptly returned to the screen.

“EDDIE, YOU’VE GOTTA GET DOWN HERE!” he cried. “I-I don’t want to scare you, but I might be roadkill!”

And the second he said that Ed turned and bolted back down the road as fast as he could.

And the second he said that Salem decided to call it.

“And that’ssss GO!” A brief pause. “So, we’ve got a few minutes to kill. How was the party?”

“Salem, you don’t really want to do this, right?”
Rambley tilted his head back. He gave them a pleading, strained smile. “I-I know that we haven’t always seen eye-to-eye, but, heh, this is a just a little crazy.”

“Mmm, nah. I think I know what I’m doin’,” Salem dismissed.

Rambley was sweating through his fur. started trying to subtly wiggle and work his arms free, but the cords needed more push than he could give.

In the meantime, he tried to distract.

“S-So, uh, where have you been all this time?”

“Where d’you think? In my swamp. ‘Course, you already knew that.”

“Yeeeahh...”

It looked like small talk wasn't going to do any good. Or more so, there seemed like no point in distracting Salem. Rambley returned to focusing on wiggling out of his binds and Salem just watched.

He was starting to get his arms moved a little. Maybe he could get loose. Maybe he could roll free!

But minutes ticked by, and just as he started to make the smallest amount of progress, Salem spoke up and started to count down.

"Ten. Nine. Eight. Seven-."

Rambley looked up. "Wh-What are you counting down to?!"

"Six. Five. Four. Three-."

"Stop that!"

"Two. One. Aaaand go."

He could hear the clinking and jingling of them moving around before suddenly he heard distant music kick on. Familiar, bouncy music that he recognized by heart.

A heart that nearly stopped when he realized the ride had started.

He struggled harder. Using all his strength to try and get free. But it was as though all the progress he imagined was either erased in an instant or didn't exist at all.

All the while he could hear the train coming down the line. It was coming much faster than it was supposed to, so Salem must've tinkered with it, but torturously it still stopped at each stop. He could hear the music changing for each section and the long pauses for dialogue he wasn't providing. Broken up by the sound of the train coming closer.

Where was Ed?!

Ed was, of course, running as fast as he could down main street. Striding over uneven ground like a track star down a strip. All he focused on was getting across the park as fast as possible.

He wasn't discreet, he wasn't careful, he was just running for it.

But Rambley had no idea because he couldn't afford to stop struggling for even a second to check where he was. He had to get free. He had to get loose!

He could hear the train rattling closer. Struggling against a speed too fast for itself but still hanging to the tracks.

Rambley looked up in time to see his purple train coming right down the tracks for him. His eyes went wide as he realized there was no chance of escape.

He turned his head away and closed his eyes tightly as he waited for impact.

And then-

SCREEEEEEEE-CHUNK

Rambley's eyes snapped back open. Slowly he turned his head, peeking over his shoulder fearfully.

The front of the train was right there. It was so close that he was shocked it wasn't brushing his whiskers. Squealed right to a stop less than a foot from his bound body.

He could only stare in slack-jawed disbelief until he suddenly noticed a continuous beeping noise and realized what happened. He had been detected on the tracks and the ride brakes had activated automatically.

The failsafe had actually worked! But the way Salem said it- hadn't they suggested they shut it off? Rambley looked up towards them.

Salem just grinned back slyly. Unphased, unsurprised.

No, they hadn't turned off the safety precautions.

Yes, they knew it was going to stop.

This whole thing was a big hoax to scare him.

He should've been fuming at that point, a part of him was, but another part of him didn't feel right at all. Maybe because of the gas, maybe because of how close the train got, but he was angry. He was so angry it hurt.

He was still shaking. His eyes prickled with tears, and he swallowed thickly.

"That was mean, Salem."

"Was it? Aww, I'm sowwy, Wambley. I wouldn't wanna bruise that big ol ego of yours, but I think it was about time ya got a taste of your own medicine," Salem mocked.

"What are you talking about?! What did I ever do to you?!" Rambley snapped.

Salem's smirk turned into a scowl.

"You put me in danger tonight, Garbage Breath. That don't go unnoticed." They hopped down and strode up to stand over him. "And it ain't the first time you did. Y'know there's a reason those gates stayed shut. But you just decided on your own to start letting in whoever walked up."

Oh, that's why they were upset. That... actually made a lot of sense. No surprise at all.

"I-!... Okay, I made a mistake tonight, but that doesn't give you the right to pretend to try to run me over! What if the train didn't stop?! You could've hurt me!"

"Don't go lecturin' me about morals when you're putting my neck on the line just so you can feel important," Salem spat. "You sure are Rambley the Raccoon, ain't cha? Center of the universe. Can dish it out but can't take it."

“And what is THAT supposed to mean?” Rambley sneered.

“Just because you look like the star doesn’t make you the good guy. It just means you’re a good actor.”

By now Rambley was frustrated and fed-up. “Ugh, just untie me already! Episode over, we’re done, I’m going home!”

Salem rolled their eye, equally irritated. They then looked over at the hidden door and got a thoughtful look, before their smirk returned.

“Sure thing, Boss. But first, howzabout we get a second opinion?”

“From who?”

“Lemme go get Mollie.”

Rambley watched with dread as Salem went into through the door. What did they mean by ‘get Mollie’? Did they mean...

He heard some scuffling before Salem started to drag something out.

He was expecting something awful.

But instead of a headless Mollie, Salem walked out with their arm hooked around a Mollie animatronic. Its wing thrown over their shoulder. The other one missing.

“Whatcha say, Mollie? Is Rambley here a good guy?” Salem asked.

They nudged around inside of its back, likely fumbling with its internal power supply. Indeed, there was a long cord pulled almost taut behind it leading back through the doorway. After a few jabs, it roused.

A cluster of crunchy noises and half-finished words. Though a couple of them did make it through.

“...Not Rambley! He hurts Lloyd. He hurts Lloyd. He hurts...”

The voice deepened and distorted and faded off. Leaving them in an eerie silence.

Salem hissed with false sympathy. “Ooo, that’s a shame.”

“You made her say that!” Rambley accused.

“And how’d I do that, Tough Guy?”

“I don’t- I don’t know, but you did! That’s obviously her ‘it barely hurts at all’ line that’s been spliced to sound like it’s talking about me!” Rambley said matter-of-factly. “And when’d I ever hurt Lloyd?!”

“You don’t remember?” Salem asked with mock shock. They got a cheeky grin. “My bad. Must’ve mixed you up with someone else.”

Rambley was about to explode when he suddenly heard something. He turned his head to listen, ignoring how the world wobbled as listening closely.

Sure enough, he heard footsteps. Someone was running down the tracks. Within moments after that, Ed came running down the tracked slope. Rambley broke into a smile.

“Eddie! Down here!”

Ed only skidded to a stop when he caught sight of the stopped train, and then saw Rambley tied to the tracks beneath it. He assumed Rambley stopped it on his own and breathed a sigh of relief.

“Thank God, Rambley! I thought I was too late; I came as fast as I...” Ed trailed off as he noticed that they weren’t alone.

And there was Salem the Skunk.

Salem was a weird mixture between Rambley and Mollie. They didn’t look quite as real-life-cartoonish

as Rambley did, but they certainly have a fully realistic look either. It was all in the one exposed eye, which had the same glassy inset look as Rambley's instead of like any of the others'.

But Salem stood as tall as a human, and that alone made them significantly more dangerous than Rambley.

Salem gave him a little wave over the Mollie animatronic's shoulder before letting it go. It fell to the ground with a crash loud enough to make both Ed and Rambley wince and flinch.

"Don't worry about them, Eddie. Just come untie me," Rambley said.

"Yeah. Go on. Go get him," Salem said. They shot Ed a sharp grin.

Ed kept an eye on them as he made his way to Rambley and crouched down beside him.

"Are you okay? Are you hurt?" he asked quietly.

“I’m fine, I’m fine. Just a little shaken... And drugged.”

“Drugged?”

“I’ll tell you later. Just untie me please.”

“Are these bungee cords?” he asked in disbelief as he started untangling them.

“Yes,” Rambley muttered. He then heard movement and snapped his head back to shoot daggers at Salem. “Don’t try anything funny!”

“Nothin’ funnier than strapping your ass to the tracks and watching you have a little temper tantrum?” Salem retorted.

“That reminds me. I hate you.”

They were interrupted by a distant thump. Movement. The same thing Rambley heard a few moments ago, but now obviously not Salem. In fact,

Salem turned their head towards the tunnel, so they heard it too.

Ed was so focused on unhooking and shifting bungee cords that he didn't notice at first. But then he did, and he slowed in what he was doing.

He lifted his head, and his eyes landed on Rambley terrified expression aimed behind him. He whipped his head back to look but he couldn't see anything in the darkness of the tunnel, and he shined his flashlight over.

The beam of light fell dead onto Lloyd's face.

Ed didn't know what was scarier, the fact that Lloyd was there or the fact that he had stalked up so quietly. That he had learned and gotten so close.

And now he was slinking closer, crawling on all fours as he closed in the small distance he needed to strike. That was no doubt the only thing holding him back, unless he was afraid of-

Ed yanked up his arm and brandished the Critter Cuff. Lloyd hesitated. The yellow slits of his pupils leveling on the device as his head lowered defensively.

Rambley got an almost spiteful smile unfocused to activate the cuff.

“Exit stage right!” he called. Then activated the Cuff.

But instead of a painful beeping that would pierce both of them and Salem- a sacrifice Rambley would gladly make- the cuff made a loud error noise and flashed. Ed looked down at with a start.

“What?”

“What?” Rambley echoed. He tried again, but another error noise. “Oh no, SALEM! WHAT DID YOU DO?!”

“Protectin’ my skin! How was I supposed to know he was gonna lead him down here?!” Salem said

through their teeth. They slowly backed up, eyes on Lloyd as they fiddled with a canister on their belt.

Lloyd seemed to recognize that the cuff was not working as he started to creep closer. Ed was stuck where he was, knowing running wouldn't do any good now.

"Rambley," Ed whispered. "Rambley, you have to do something."

The cuff made another error noise.

"Wh-What do you mean access denied?! I'm the admin! I GIVE ACCESS!" Rambley shouted to a popup only he could see. But he wasn't getting anywhere. His access had been blocked.

"Rambley," Ed whispered a little harsher.

Rambley focused in again and caught sight of Lloyd getting in position to pounce. Ed gave up on the cuff and swung his arm down to shield Rambley, much to the raccoon's horror.

“Eddie, you’re going to have to run!” he whispered.

Ed didn’t move.

Lloyd lurched forward with his claws bared.

“ED, RUN!!!”

Ed desperately shielded himself with his Critter Cuff-

Before something flew through the air and smacked Lloyd in the face. A canister. A canister that immediately burst into a foul spray before all but exploding in noxious gas. In seconds, all three of them was overwhelmed with it.

Ed couldn’t see. It burned, it stunk, he had to hold his breath and even then, he could feel it trying to creep up his nose. Lloyd was somewhere lost in the cloud, thrashing and roaring, trying to claw the spray from his face with little success.

Ed turned around and blindly felt through the fog for Rambley, trying to untether him again.

“GO! DON’T WORRY ABOUT ME! GO!” Rambley shouted before breaking into a coughing and heaving fit.

Ed couldn’t leave him. He couldn’t! He couldn’t leave him to be mauled.

Unless... Unless he could distract Lloyd and get him away. That was his only chance- and considering that the smoke was starting to dissipate a little, it was one he was quickly losing.

He patted Rambley as a signal that he had a plan and shot to his feet. He stumbled through the cloud using the train to guide him until he staggered into clearer air. He made it past the back of the train before turning around and whistling.

“HEY-!” He cut himself off coughing. He continued backing up, struggling to catch his breath to yell in a hoarse voice, “Here! Back here! Lloyd! LLOYD!”

This seemed to catch the lion's attention as he saw him staggering through the thinning cloud. The moment he saw him he turned around and ran for it, ignoring how much his lungs burned as he ran down the tracks. He could hear Lloyd coming into the passage and slamming into the side blindly as he made it out the other end and into Finley's section of the attraction.

This was it. This was the moment where he either lost Lloyd or lost his life.

He took a sharp left and all but dove into Finley's little cave. He huddled inside of the small space. His knee resting on the track for the Finley standee, which dug into his leg through his jeans.

It would've been an awful hiding place, but somehow Lloyd didn't see him. As he tore through, Ed noticed that the dark rusty fluid that had spewed out of the canister was all over his face and in his eyes. Which probably explained why Lloyd clipped the doorway into the next passage as he barreled through.

Ed waited for him to get further away before starting to climb out and carefully creeping back towards the passage.

This could work. This was working! He could hear Lloyd's frantic thumping the room over.

Until he didn't.

It was as though Lloyd had stopped on a dime. He couldn't have heard Ed, could he? There's no way. He was as quiet as a mouse.

But then those footsteps returned, and they were coming back.

The jig was up. Turning on his heel, Ed ran back out of Finley's section and into the short passage. He would run through and up the hill, somehow without losing speed, and into Lloyd's section.

Or wait, the other door! The one in the Salem section. It was a dead end, but there could be a

place to hide in there- if Lloyd could even FIT in there. If he couldn't block the door with a shelf or something. Then maybe that would distract Lloyd long enough for Rambley to sneak away.

But these hopes were fading fast as Lloyd began to close in. Ed could hear him on his heels as he took a sharp right around the corner and ran for the partially opened door.

His hand almost grabbed it before he was blindsided by a huge paw. Lloyd easily batting him aside, sending him flying onto the fallen ceiling. His arm burning from where a claw caught him, but he barely noticed when Lloyd was looming over him. The lion coming in for the kill, his jaw spread.

The whole time the two had been out of the room, Rambley had been working to get himself free. He had managed to wriggle himself loose due to the cords Ed had unhooked. He turned over on his hands and knees and nearly fell over as the world wobbled.

Ugh. Last time he was sedated he had woken up long enough later that the side effects wore off. How was he supposed to help Ed in this state?

He looked around for Salem, but they were gone. Well, great. They got them into this mess, and they split. Just peachy.

And just as he was thinking that he heard rapid footsteps, and Ed came running into the room and turned for the door. Lloyd was right behind him, swiping him and sending him landing painfully into the rubble.

“No, no, NO, NO! ED!” he cried.

Rambley could smell blood even before he saw the smear on Ed’s arm.

Lloyd had hurt him, and now Lloyd was going to EAT him. Just like all the little animals that crept into Indigo Park.

And before he knew it, he pounced.

Ed waited until the last second to roll to twist to the side and just barely missed the partially blinded Lloyd's bite. And before Lloyd could get a second shot, Rambley was on him. He sunk his teeth into the back of the beast's neck, almost slotting right into the scars of an old bite wound.

Lloyd reacted instantly with a bellow and began to thrash. Rambley held on for dear life until he all but got rolled over and the resulting air being forced out of his lungs caused his bite and grip to release.

Lloyd continued and slammed into the wall, shaking his head to recombobulate himself before looking back. Only one of his eyes partially opened and landing right on Rambley, who stared him back with a glare that barely masked his fear. Ed now with his hands up preparing to either make a grab for Rambley or shove Lloyd off when he got on him.

But instead, something very strange happened.

That eye stayed locked on Rambley, but Lloyd started to sink lower. Not in preparation to pounce, not with him tight up against the wall, but as though in submission. Or fear.

He stayed low and crept along the wall, one paw trailing on it and the other on the floor like he was feeling his way along. Until his paw hooked around the corner, and then in an instant, Lloyd darted around the corner and fled down the passage back towards Finley's exhibit.

Neither Ed nor Rambley moved an inch until they couldn't hear any trace of Lloyd. Rambley's ears twitched as he listened, before he slouched back on the rockery with a sigh. Then gagged a little.

"Ughhha." He scraped his fingers down his tongue to get the leftover fur off and shivered, shaking his fingers off. "Gross. So, so gross." He spat off to the side.

"Are you okay?" Ed asked.

“Ugh, yes... Wait, me? What about you?! You’re bleeding!” Rambley stood up quickly. “Let me take a look at... that...”

With a breathless little huff, Rambley teetered on his legs and came right back down, falling forward and thankfully into Ed’s arms. Him reaching out to catch him just in time.

“Whoa, Buddy!”

“I’m okay. Sorry ‘bout that. Just a lil woozy, stood up too fast,” Rambley slurred.

He took a breather for a few seconds before lifting up onto his knees, using Ed’s arms to keep himself upright. “Alright, lemme see it.”

“It’s just a scratch. Don’t worry about it.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

Seeing that he wasn’t going to let it go, Ed held out and turned his arm so he could see it. Rambley

hissed and carefully held the skin around it so he could see.

“He gotcha good. But there’s first aid stations all around the park, including back at home. We’ll patch you up in a jiffy!” he assured with a sweet smile.

Ed returned with a tired one. Then looked over at the train warily.

“Think he’ll go back to the theater now?”

“If he knows what’s good for him he will! Did you see him run off with his tail between his legs? Looks like we showed him who’s boss!” Rambley said. Then tacked on an under-his-breath, “About time.”

“You know I thought you were just kidding that time you said you were going to bite,” Ed lightly teased.

Rambley got a more sheepish smile. “Heh, I got a little desperate.”

There was a quiet moment before Rambley suddenly slumped forward into a clingy hug. Ed thought he was falling over again and caught him but realized what he was doing and returned the gesture.

“Are you okay?” Ed repeated.

Rambley nodded against his shoulder.

“Good... Because I got scared back there.”

“Happy Halloween,” Rambley said muffled into his shoulder.

Ed chuckled tiredly. Of course this would happen on Halloween.

As much as he wanted to just sit here and catch his breath, he knew they had to get back to the treehouse. This was already Lloyd’s second appearance of the night, and he didn’t want to wait around until he got the nerve for a third. As for Salem...

...Wait. Where WAS Salem?

“What happened to Salem?”

“Who cares,” Rambley mumbled. “Just a bully with a bad sense of humor...”

“And great hair.”

Ed and Rambley both looked up. The latter so quickly that the world spun and he almost fell backwards, if not for Ed holding him up.

Up through the hole in the ceiling the two could see none other than Salem standing there, grinning down at them.

“If you’re going to whine about me, ‘least get the facts straight.”

“Thanks for bailing out on us,” Rambley said dryly.

“You could’ve at least thrown something down when Lloyd had us pinned!”

“These things don’t come easy, Chompers. You’re lucky I used the first one or beefcake there would’ve been chopped liver,” Salem pointed out.

Rambley frowned while Ed looked uneasy at the thought.

“But since I’ve got the two of you together, lemme letcha off with a warning. That thing that happened tonight- that embarrassingly lame little get-together of goody-goody guests- it ain’t happenin’ again. Or else...”

Salem hooked their hand under their bangs and lifted and combed them back to reveal their hidden eye.

It was pitch black with a small yellow pupil.

“We’re gonna have problems.”

It looked almost like Mollie’s and Lloyd’s, and it sent a chill down Ed’s spine.

Salem dropped their bang and combed it carefully back over the darkened-out eye.

“You can play around with your life all you want, but you ain’t draggin’ down the rest of us with you,” they warned. They then shot a finger gun at Rambley with a tongue click. “Smell ya later, Trash Mouth.”

With that, Salem walked off out of sight. The two could hear their trademark laugh before they all but disappeared without a trace.

Rambley sighed. “Funny. All these years and they still always have the last laugh.”

“I don’t remember Salem winning that much in the cartoon,” Ed said somewhat absentmindedly, still watching the hole and processing what he had just seen. What that eye could’ve meant.

“I didn’t mean the cartoon.”

“...Oh.”

Rambley rubbed over his face tiredly, hoping it would clear up his cotton stuffed head. Ed noticed and snapped out of his thoughts.

“Let’s get you home.”

“Thanks. Home sounds good right now.”

Rambley started to prepare himself to stand up, but Ed stopped him with a hand on the shoulder.

“Wait, you might still be woozy. How about I carry you?”

“Wha- really?” Rambley said with surprise.

“Sure! Here, get on.”

He crouched in front of him with his arms behind his back and Rambley eagerly, but somewhat sluggishly, climbed on. He wrapped his arms comfortably around Ed’s shoulders.

“If I get too heavy just tell me!”

Ed didn't mean to chuckle at that one.

With Rambley on his back, Ed got back to his feet and began to walk back onto the tracks, going towards Lloyd's display and away from the direction the real Lloyd ran. He could feel a few sore spots from where he hit the rubble the wrong way and way too hard, but it didn't do much to hold him back.

Rambley was initially upright but by time they got to the giftshop he had mostly sunken onto Ed's shoulders. One arm dangling down Ed's front and his head resting on his shoulder.

He looked at the cleaned fountain as they passed by and smiled a little-purposefully ignoring the red cup floating in it.

“Hey Eddie?” he spoke up.

“Yeah?”

“Have I told you that you’re the best Rangler ever?”

Ed smiled. “I think you might’ve said that once. When you were burning up and hallucinating.”

“Aww, Eddie, I meant it. And I still do! In fact, I think- you know what I think? I think... you should be a Royal Rangler,” Rambley said. “You certainly deserve it for everything you’ve done for me and the park. I don’t know what I’d do without you!”

“Same, Buddy,” Ed said honestly. “But you don’t owe me anything.”

“Oh... Never mind then!”

Rambley tried to not sound too disappointed.

...

“...So, what are the perks? If I was a Royal Rangler.”

Oh, so he was interested! That perked Rambley right up.

“There are a TON of perks! First off you would have full unrestricted access to the park- and that includes the highly exclusive Royal Ranglers’ rooms- you would get your very own limited-edition Royal Rangler cuff, you would be allowed full access to get up close and personal with the mascots-.”

“Some perk. I already do that,” Ed chimed in.

Rambley snickered and gave him a one-armed hug. Though in the back of his mind a very vivid image of Lloyd corning Ed crept up. Now there was a double-edged perk if he had ever seen one...

“The point IS that you’d be recognized in a formal position for all you do! And not only would you be the only Royal Rangler currently active, but you would be the only Royal Rangler chosen by yours truly. And I wouldn’t choose anybody else.”

“That... means a lot, Rambley. Thanks.”

Rambley was sort of surprised by how sincere he was. It made him wonder, but he didn't ask.

"Don't mention it, Eddie! I think I'm going to rest for a few minutes if that's okay?" he asked. Ed could hear him starting to get a little breathless, probably from his whole spiel.

"That's fine by me. I'll tell you when we get there."

"I'm not going to rest that hard," Rambley teased. Though he returned to slouching on Ed's shoulder, especially now that they were heading down the street away from the theater and he didn't feel so on-guard.

Technically Rambley was not allowed to fire or promote Ranglers of any kind, but so what! Who was going to stop him? Ed was made for the role. He worked just as hard as Rambley did for the park- heck, he probably worked even harder considering he just rescued him- and he cared more than any employee he had ever known!

Who could turn him down? Not Rambley!

Not Rambley. By time Ed and Rambley got back to the treehouse it was so late that it was no longer just technically morning and was pretty much almost morning. But after the rush of everything earlier, Ed was too wide awake to even consider going to sleep. Rambley on the other hand- he was pretty sure he conked out through most of the walk back.

But he woke up as Ed ducked to step inside. Lifting his head with a small groan and rubbing his face.

“Oh hey, we’re home,” he said groggily.

“Yup. Should I put you in bed?” Ed asked.

“No, no. I’m okay.” Rambley waved him off. “Just plop me down somewhere.”

“Is near the couch okay?”

“Yes, please.”

Ed let Rambley down carefully and steadied him by the shoulder when he swayed a little.

“Maybe you should sit down. Eat something.”

The second Ed mentioned eating, Rambley’s brain woke up enough to suddenly recognize that he could smell food. His eyes shot to the stack of trays on his couch and immediately his mouth started to water.

Which would’ve been great if it didn’t still have a lingering funky taste. And he couldn’t even tell if it was a side effect of the gas, a side effect from the other gas, or Lloyd’s- ugh- leftovers.

“Oh, I would love to. But I can’t yet. Just let me go scrub my mouth out. I think I’ve got a little bleach left under my sink...”

Ed chuckled and dropped on the couch to rest, watching Rambley wobble his way to the door.

Rambley made his way into the tiny bathroom. He had become comfortable with the tiny cubicle after all this time, but it was barely bigger than a closet.

The shower was sectioned with a flimsy curtain and rim on the floor was so short that he had tripped over it at least a dozen times, and barely kept water in. Which was likely why there was a drain directly in the center of the floor. Thankfully, it was all a pleasant creamy white color, so he was able to keep it pretty clean with a little bleach.

Bleach that he wasn't really going to use on his mouth. No, he had something else for that.

He opened the cabinet under the sink and searched through the bottles before finding an open box way in the back and pulling it out. Baking soda, half full but still looked safe. He then stood up, teetering a little as he did, and grabbed for his toothbrush. An official Indigo Park Rambley toothbrush! It might've been for kids, but it was too cute to not use.

Besides, he had hundreds of the things in a cardboard box shoved into his bedroom. Beggars couldn't be choosers!

He tried to make a paste of wet baking soda on the toothbrush before beginning to brush his teeth. Ugh, the taste could've been better, but at least it tasted clean. Lloyd smelled like he hadn't gotten a proper bath since the park closed and he probably hadn't.

Hmph. He thought the proud, prestigious, oh-so-wonderful Lloyd would've taken better care of himself.

...But in the back of his mind a tiny little voice that sounded deceptively like Salem's reminded him that Lloyd couldn't. That it wasn't Lloyd actor extraordinary and legendary drama king, but just a neglected animal.

...Rambley suddenly felt a little sick, and he was pretty sure it wasn't just the slurry of baking soda scrubbing along his teeth.

“He hurts Lloyd. He hurts Lloyd. He hurts Lloyd.”

He didn't feel bad. He didn't do anything wrong. It wasn't his fault.

He hiccupped and spat out the foamy mouthful that had tried to creep down his throat. Then gagged when he saw another loose little hair come out.

“Ugh...” He was considering using the bleach. He rinsed his mouth out with multiple handfuls of water.

But if there was any sympathy to give Lloyd, it was that he didn't have the amenities that Rambley had gotten. Rambley was the star, so he had gotten special privileges- at least, that's why he assumed he was the only one who got his own house and furniture!

Of course, this wasn't always a house. This used to be a photo op location, but then was formatted into a homestead once Rambley was given the chance to be a physical mascot- the second time. The time that worked.

Still though... it was odd that it was only him. He hadn't seen Salem's house since the park closed, since even before that, but he was pretty sure it didn't have its own amenities. It was just a photo op location, and he assumed that was where Salem was living now, but maybe it wasn't. He didn't know. He knew Lloyd was stuck in the theater now, but at least he didn't have to go back to a cage, right?

There was nothing wrong with being fortunate, right? If Lloyd was acting normal and not crazy, then Rambley could've let him use his shower. Heck, as much as he was jea- as he had complicated feelings about his friend's haughty behavior, Rambley wasn't cruel enough to turn any of his friends away. If Lloyd was acting right, he would've humbly welcomed him into his home and given him a place to sleep... likely somewhere waaay on the other side of the house.

But... that didn't happen. Nobody was acting right, Lloyd included. In a way, Rambley almost did miss him. He might've been full of himself, but... seeing him like this...

Rambley swallowed tensely. He didn't want to think about it. There was no point in dwelling on it.

And hey! At least this meant he didn't have to clean Lloyd's hair out of the shower drain!

Rambley smacked a hand over his mouth and withheld another gag.

After splashing some cold water on his face to wake up a little, he put the stuff away and left his bathroom. Only to immediately duck into his curtained area.

He wound his way through the boxes, peeking into a couple of them and searching around until he found a familiar box with a white cross and his own face on it, the first aid kit.

"Here we go! Found it!" he chirped triumphantly.

He stumbled his way out of his bedroom only to find that Ed was no longer on the couch.

“Eddie?” he squeaked.

“Out here!” Ed called from outside. “Moving this thing.”

He finished propping the cutout on the wall outside of the door before coming back in and shutting the door behind him.

“Is that the first aid kit you were talking about?”

“You’re about to find out!” Rambley pointed at the loveseat. “Sit!”

Ed sat down. Rambley hopped up to sit beside him and popped open the first aid kit.

It was stuffed with all sorts of stuff. Small roles of gauze and medical tape, some tubes of ointment and a little brown bottle of disinfectant, cotton balls, cotton swabs, and even a little plastic case that looked to have needles and thread in it- though it didn’t necessarily look like surgical thread,

considering that it was blue. There was also a few smooshed boxes of band-aids.

Something about the kit made him a little nervous. Especially when Rambley started yanking things out.

“I don’t think it’s that bad.”

“Not yet it’s not, but we need to make sure it doesn’t get worse,” Rambley said.

He hummed as he took out a little bottle of liquid antiseptic, popped it open, and wet a cotton ball. He then brought it over to Ed’s scratch.

“This might sting a little bit.”

He carefully dabbed at the cut to clean it. It only stung for a few seconds but wasn’t anything worse than a small wince.

“There we go, nice and clean,” Rambley said. Then he squinted at the scratch with a hum. “This might be a little too big for a band-aid. Let’s see...”

He started to look through the various bandage boxes before his ears perked, signaling that he had found what he was looking for. He pulled out some wrapped, large square band-aids.

“Now this part is very important...” he warned. Then he flashed a spread of multicolored bandages with a smile. “Which one?”

To no surprise, they were Indigo Park brand band-aids and because of that, they had Indigo cartoon characters on them. Such as a dark purple one with little Rambley heads on it, a yellow one with Mollie, a teal one with Finley, a blue one with Lloyd, a red one with Salem, and a pink one with a pink raccoon. Along with a couple of duplicates.

Ed rubbed his chin as though in serious thought.

“That’s a tricky one... I guess I’ve got to give it to Lloyd since he’s the one who did it,” he said with an exaggerated shrug. Which gave away immediately that he was pulling Rambley’s leg.

“I respect your decision,” Rambley said, tenting his fingers- still holding the band-aids. “...But do you really want Lloyd on your arm?”

“You’re right. I’ve got to go with Salem.”

“Okay, Buster. You’re getting a Mollie,” Rambley said flatly.

“Not Rambley?”

Rambley’s ear twitched and his head shot back up.

“What?”

“You don’t want me wearing your face on my arm?”
Ed joked.

“OH! Sorry, I thought you said- I don’t know what you said, heh. Nah, it’s okay. I don’t need to put my face on you.” He chuckled awkwardly as he put the others back into the box. Absentmindedly adding an under-his-breath, “Not when I’ve got my smell all over you.”

Ed's brows shot up. "What?"

"But can you believe the nerve of those two? Both of 'em! Salem playing a prank that mean and Lloyd trying to hog the spotlight as usual. Teh! Buncha clowns," Rambley said. He unpeeled the plastic off the bandage before adding a dash of antibiotic from one of the tubes, then carefully placed it securely in place over Ed's scratch. "There you go, Buddy!"

"Thank you, Nurse Rambley."

"Don't mention it! It's the least I can do after such a daring rescue. Which, by the way, I am very thankful for," Rambley said with a grin. He started putting the stuff away.

Normally Rambley would be fuming over that scratch, but all things considered Ed dodged a big furry bullet. It could've been a whole lot worse.

To think that Salem would go so far. They were friends!... Well, no. Salem was always scheming and

plotting plans that Rambley and his friends put a stop to, but there were times when they would team up and it would really feel like they were friends! And because of that, Rambley always considered Salem one of his pals deep in his heart.

...But those weren't real, were they? Those were just stories from the cartoons. In reality, the real Rambley barely knew the real Salem, and they were certainly far from friends...

The real Finley was dangerous, the real Lloyd was feral, the real Mollie was... gone. But Rambley? Not Rambley. He was still here.

...Wasn't he?

"Who's the pink raccoon?"

"Huh?" Rambley snapped his head up again and this time the world did that spinning thing again. He planted a hand on the side of his head to still it. "Pink raccoon... Oh, you mean Raspberry!"

“Raspberry, huh? Hey, you okay? Do you need to lay down?”

“No, no, no. I’m good. Just moved my head too fast,” Rambley assured.

He pulled his hand back as the feeling faded and picked up the appropriate bandage again. The little raccoon looked a lot like Rambley himself, save that she was pink with blue eyes, had brown stripes, hands, and feet, and had a purple bow at the back of her neck. Everything about her was basically just a play off him.

He held it up to Ed. “Remember her?”

“No, but I could’ve sworn I’ve seen her somewhere... Maybe over at the funfair?”

“Ding-ding! As observant as ever, Eddie! And I’ll explain why in a minute, but first a quick history lesson. Raspberry was a largely one-off character who showed up in only a handful of episodes across the Indigo Cartoons’ lengthy history. Four

specifically- The Big Berry Bake-off, My Sweet Valentine, Roses are Raspberry, and Train Time Troubles, often confused for Trouble on the Tracks.”

Trouble on the Tracks could’ve summed up their entire night, really.

Ed could’ve sworn he had seen most, if all the older Indigo cartoons. He pretty much watched them religiously as a kid. Yet she didn’t ring any bells. He would’ve remembered Rambley having a girlfriend or little sister, or whatever she was supposed to be.

But the one thing that got him was-

“She was in four episodes, and she got on band-aids?”

That got a snicker from Rambley.

“Wellll, she also starred as an extra friend in one of the newer Indigo specials, an Indigo Christmas Wish. Which for some reason came out in July. I’ve never really understood the Christmas in July

sentiment myself, but it certainly gets a lot of attention,” he prattled. He raised a finger matter-of-factly. “But that was not why Raspberry was promoted from background character to gracing Indigo’s own medical products. That was because of a push by upper management to have a character aimed more for girls when it was decided that Mollie wasn’t girly enough. Which is ridiculous if you ask me. Alice was more of the motherly type, Gloria was more chic than cutesy- the most traditionally girly of the lot wasn’t even a girl, it was... well, you know.”

Ed furrowed his brows in confusion. “I don’t remember you being girly.”

Rambley gave him a downright befuddled look. “I meant Lloyd.”

“...I don’t remember Lloyd being girly.”

“Well, apparently the higher ups didn’t either, because they wanted someone pink with big goo-goo eyes and they went right for Raspberry,” Rambley remarked.

“...So, when you said they gave Lloyd a girlfriend first-,” Ed began with the smallest edge of a smirk.

“Raspberry was not my girlfriend,” Rambley shot down.

“Touchy subject?”

“To be honest, I’m still sort of peeved about the whole Mollie thing. They replaced my best friend with my pink clone.”

“Yeah, it kinda sucks when that happens.”

“Tell me about it- So, Indigo Park’s bigwigs got to work adding Raspberry to my pals and the roster of commonly used characters for merchandise. There were even plans to give her a place in the park, but that got a little sidetracked with the whole, umm... very abrupt closure of the park, unfortunately. Did you see the pink cartoon house over in Berryburg? That was going to be her little meet and greet section!”

Ed's curiosity gave way to a look of unease. "Wait, are you saying she was-?"

"A mascot? Don't you worry, they hadn't gotten started on any of that! Creating life takes a lot longer than that. Though it might've been in process... We might need to check when we get to the labs."

Right, the labs. That's where they could answer a lot of questions, couldn't they? Could also be the place where Ed could confirm some of his suspicions about what was going on here.

"Eh, it was probably for the best. Her role in the movie was just as a damsel in distress, and I guess I've got that role covered from now on," Rambley joked, rubbing his neck. "Which, again, thank you."

"Don't sweat it."

"I won't. But you would be surprised how many obscure Indigo characters there are. There's, gosh, so many stories I could tell you. Hey, maybe that

could give us a topic for conversation on our hike to the labs! It might take us a while to get over there so we'll need some way to pass the time."

"You're not thinking of hiking out there tomorrow, are you?" Ed guessed.

"Why not? We don't have to worry about walking up on Salem and getting away from the theater might do us some good. I sure know it would make me feel better. Plus, you don't have to stream tomorrow!"

Rambley said. He then interjected before Ed could.

"Ah-ah-ah. I see that look. Don't you worry, Eddie. I'll be all better after a good night's sleep. But before thaaat..." He sat the first aid kit on the floor and pushed it away. "I think it's just about movie time!"

...

"I'm going to level with you, Rambley. I think you're stretching yourself a little thin," Ed admitted. "I mean, you just got kidnapped and drugged, and you want to stay up watching movies, but you're planning on getting up and hiking across the park."

Rambley chuckled. “Okay, okay. Maybe I’m thinking a little big, but I think it’s doable! Besides, if I start to get tired, I’ve always got my best buddy wonderful Royal Rangler to give me a hand. Or a shoulder or two.”

He gave Ed the biggest doe eyes he could manage with cheeky little grin. That sort of look that told Ed that Rambley was only half-joking, and yes, Ed would probably cave if he did ask him to tote him around.

Damn those marketable goo-goo eyes.

“Speaking of a pick-me-up, I’ve been waiting for this all day!”

Rambley carefully leaned over, to not get dizzy again, and pulled one of the trays into his lap. He peeled up the side like he was opening a present and found a bunch of ghost marshmallows waiting for him.

“Ooo, and I’ve been dying for one of these.”

He eagerly popped one into his mouth with a delighted hum. Then another.

It was crazy to think that this was the same guy who had been half-asleep when they walked in. Despite everything, Rambley seemed okay.

...In fact, he seemed a little too okay, all things considered. Rambley could easily be covering. But Ed didn’t know if he’d start stepping on toes if he tried to ask and make sure he was alright.

He toyed with the idea for a few minutes while getting his phone out to look for movies, and eventually settled on saying something.

“Hey, before we start the movie...” he began. “...Do you want to talk about what happened?”

Rambley cocked a brow and an ear. “Haven’t we been talking about it?”

Good point. Bad idea.

“Unless- wait, what part are you talking about?”

“Just... anything you wanted to talk about.”

Rambley could tell he was getting the run around. His ears twitched thoughtfully, and he turned himself towards Ed.

“What’s on your mind?”

“Uh, not much,” Ed said, looking back down at his phone. Avoiding Rambley’s unamused squint.

“That was very believable, Eddie. Come on, whatcha thinkin’ about?”

Well, he was going to have to say something. Rambley just wasn’t letting it go as easily as Ed could’ve.

“Okay, I just wanted to say...” There was at least one thing that he wanted to say. “...That I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you.”

“What are you talking about? You were there! You’ve always been there for me, Buddy!”

“Not really. I was late to the party- both of them,” Ed half-heartedly joked. “I don’t want to freak you out, but we got lucky. It could’ve gone so much worse...”

Rambley’s face softened. “Were you worried about me?”

“When am I not?”

“I don’t want you to worry about me, Eddie...”

Rambley said with a guilty smile. “Normally I can take care of myself just fine! I just got sloppy tonight. I let my guard down and it backfired. I won’t let it happen again.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I know, I know. But I don’t want you to think you can’t leave me alone for five seconds! Tonight was a disaster, I’ll admit, but it all worked out. That’s the important part.”

“I guess so... Sorry, I didn’t mean to bring down the mood.”

“You didn’t,” Rambley assured. He looked like he was feeling better again, and he felt like a weight he didn’t know of was pulled off his shoulders.

Ed felt...

“Movie time?”

“Sure! Let me just turn off one or two of these lights.” Rambley briefly unfocused and the living room lights clicked off. “Perfect! The atmosphere is much better.”

He sunk back into the couch while nibbling on another marshmallow. Feeling a little chilly- a side

effect of the sedation- Rambley reached back and grabbed Ed's cloak to pull over his shoulders.

There. Now everything was perfect. Good food. Good company. No worries.

Rambley the Raccoon felt like his old self again. He didn't have a care in the world. It was perfect.

...

...Rrr...

Rrr... Rrr...

Rrrrrrr. Rrrrrrr. Rrrrrrr.

Too perfect.

He hoped Ed didn't notice but then he looked towards him and Rambley plastered on a big smile.

"Gosh, I must've been hungrier than I thought! Wow, that's crazy. Yup," Rambley rushed out. He hastily

shoved the marshmallow into his mouth and grabbed for another one.

Ed got a slow smile.

“Are you purring?”

“Ha! Nooo. Raccoons don’t purr,” Rambley brushed off. “That was just my stomach is all!”

That didn’t sound like any stomach growl Ed had ever heard. Not that he could listen anymore since they had stopped- the embarrassment alone halted the little vibrations in their tracks, thank Indigo.

But since they had such a long day and an even longer night, Ed decided to let it go just this once. He went back to picking out a movie and eventually settled on one of the ones he had been looking forward to. Rambley was right back at his side with a ghost marshmallow in each hand, offering one up to Ed who gladly accepted it.

Now time for a calm, peaceful night.

...

“Oh no. Oh no. Oh nooo why would you- no, no, just turn around! That’s obviously a ghost, turn around!” Rambley muttered under his breath as he watched the camera creep closer to the woman standing in the corner. Ed’s black cloak clasped in his hands as he watched the little screen wide-eyed. “She’s going to turn around and have a freaky face. I just know it, she’s gonna do it. Why aren’t they running, this is obviously a trap!”

Ed had a suspicion he was right. But right when he was about to open his mouth, the woman turned around.

And as expected, she had a pretty creepy face. And she roared.

And Rambley screamed.

“AIIIIIEEE!”

He clung onto Ed's arm for dear life and buried his face between it and the couch. Ed jumped more from him than the movie.

"Did she get them?!" Rambley asked.

"No, they got away. They're running now."

"They should've done that to begin with!... What about now?"

"Still running. Uh oh. Looks like one guy got lost."

"Oh, he's a goner. Tell me when they get him."

Forget the movie. Rambley was the main entertainment as far as Ed was concerned.

...

The second movie closed on an unexpectedly sad note. It was that sort of sentimental that made Ed's chest ache a little. But then again, sad movies about families always sort of did that to him.

“I can’t believe they were dead the whole time. What an incredible story!” Rambley said.

Ed noticed that his voice had been losing a lot of steam over the course of the movie’s runtime. This was the most enthusiasm he had shown in a while and even it was punctuated by a yawn into his hand.

“That WAS pretty cool. But I think it’s time for bed,” he said, amused. He started to get his phone ready to shut off.

Rambley caught his arm to stop him, waving off with his other hand.

“No, I’m good. One more.”

“Buddy, the sun’s coming up.”

“It’s going to come up whether we watch a movie or not. One more, please?”

That was true, but still... Eh, if Rambley insisted. And it wouldn't be Ed's first all-nighter. So, he put on another movie, another one of those quieter psychologic thriller kinds that was liable to put them both to sleep.

Then he adjusted on the couch a little more comfortably, stretching his legs out far to give him room. Rambley stifled another yawn and began to watch with lidded eyes.

...

Ed ran as fast as he could down a hallway that looked just like the last one, lined with doors. The fancy purple wallpaper and tiled floors disorienting as he tried to find his way through the hotel.

She was coming. He could hear her feet slapping on the glossy floor as though she was right behind him even though he knew she was at least around the corner. As he reached the end of the hall he looked back, seeing the woman staggering out from

around the corner in a fast jerky movement. A tangle of wet black hair hiding her face.

He kept running and found that the hotel led directly into a hospital wing. There was glass all over the floor and faded Indigo Park posters slapped over the cracked walls.

There was a solitary door halfway down the hall that he ran to. It wouldn't open, it was locked! He used all his might to take a swing at the door handle and punched it right off, and then was able to easily push through and shut the door behind him. He could hear her super-fast footsteps racing up behind him and stopping outside the door.

There was a crack in the door right beside his ear and he could hear her breathing heavily into it.

He looked for another way out, but the room was a dead end. Filled with broken furniture and a singular antique television set. There were no windows at all!

Suddenly, the television set turned on to snowy static, and then Rambley appeared. Except something was wrong with him. He looked distorted and glitchy, mouth opening and closing like he was talking but no sound. Then he began flapping his arms like a bird.

What in the absolute-

Ed woke with a start. He lifted his head and looked around, only to see that he was in the treehouse. Still on the couch, though now slouched back in the corner of it with one arm flung over the back. He felt sore, but he couldn't tell if it was because of how weirdly he fell asleep or because of getting tossed around by Lloyd.

There was a warmth cuddled up at his side. Ed wasn't surprised to look down and see Rambley. Or the black ball of fabric that was his cloak wrapped around Rambley. He wondered which of them had fallen asleep first.

He lifted his phone off his stomach and clicked it on. After seven. He was surprised that the sun wasn't up yet- though a quick look at the windows revealed that it was getting there. The kitchen light made it harder to see, but he could see a piece of lightening sky.

Time for bed. He looked down at Rambley and considered his options, then decided to not wake him up. Instead, he sat his phone on the armrest and began to slowly sit up, then carefully began to slide his arms under the balled up form of his friend.

He was just starting to lift him when Rambley stirred.

“Mmm, Eddie?”

“It's me. I'm just taking you to bed,” Ed assured.

Rambley shifted around enough to partially uncover his head. He looked like he was struggling to keep his eyes open.

“No thanks. 'M okay here.”

Rambley was just determined to sleep on this couch, wasn't he?

Maybe he didn't want to be alone. Ed could understand that. Would he really feel comfortable taking his eyes off the little guy this soon after someone broke in and kidnapped him?

"...Okay." Ed sat him right back down at his side. "Go back to sleep, Buddy."

Rambley gave him a sleepy smile. "I plan on it."

Then he pulled the cloak back down over his face, latched back onto Ed's arm, and was out like a light.

Ed knew without a doubt that he'd be waking up sore tomorrow sleeping half-upright like this, but eh, he slept through worse. At least the warmth took the chill off.

But things weren't all great. Because once Rambley fell back asleep, Ed was left with his thoughts.

Sometimes it was so easy to clam up and not press an issue. Don't make anyone mad, just stay quiet and let it go. Ed learned a long time ago that if you started to prod there was a good chance you'd get a push back.

Rambley wasn't like that, Ed was sure, but... he had decided to stay quiet. He decided to just let it all go. Que sera sera and all that. Just be happy it wasn't a disaster. Be thankful. Be appreciative.

...But the truth was, Ed didn't feel great about what happened today. Everything turned out alright, but nothing was actually alright. All it had cemented was-

Lloyd was a huge problem.

Salem was a different but equally huge problem.

Oh, and now a bunch of his but mostly Laura's friends had been invited into the park and had

started breaking windows. Which was going to be more work for them, especially if they came back.

And Ed hadn't said a thing.

Or well, he did, but not loud enough. Not forceful enough. He bent right over backwards and let the whole thing spiral out of control.

And then when he needed to be there he wasn't. He wasn't at the party, he wasn't there when Rambley was kidnapped, and he wasn't by the tracks when Salem turned on the train. He tried to be there, but he was too late. And it was scary to think that the only reason he hadn't lost Rambley was because Salem hadn't been serious. If they had... Ed didn't want to think of the what ifs that could've been.

But that wasn't going to happen again. He was on board with this plan to head to the labs because he needed answers on the park and Rambley needed his friends, but from now on he was going to be more careful.

Rambley was counting in him. He might've thought it was just to help repair the park, but it was beyond that. Whenever Rambley walked out that door he was in immediate danger from all sides. And staying inside wasn't an option either when there was a significant other danger in the form of a bag of rations that was slowly depleting itself over in the kitchen corner.

Ed looked out at the foggy dull glow of morning before looking back down at Rambley. Then he carefully reached around and hugged him.

"I've got you, Buddy."

"Mmm. Thanks," Rambley mumbled. He was still half-asleep, not even aware what he was thanking him for.

Ed smiled to himself and tried to get comfortable. Tomorrow was going to come way too early, but he'd be here.

He wasn't going anywhere. Ed awoke to the crinkling of tin foil. Still slouched on the couch, he opened his eyes and turned his head.

And found Rambley kneeling beside the couch, watching Ed like a hawk, trying to sneakily open one of the trays of food. He got an embarrassed smile.

"Heh, uh, I thought it'd make less noise to sneak the food out then to pick it up."

Ed gave a non-committal sound, still barely awake. He rubbed his eye.

"What time is it?"

"Afternoon. We'll be getting a late start," Rambley said. He grabbed out a couple of deviled eggs and smelled them. "These should've been refrigerated... but they're probably fine! They can't be worse than some of the stuff I've eaten out of the refrigerators around the park," he remarked. He popped one in his mouth and hummed happily. "Tastes great!"

Ed stuck out his hand and Rambley placed two egg halves into it.

“Eat up! They might not be poached or Sunny-Side-Up, but an egg’s an egg! Gosh, I can’t remember the last time I had eggs. Or really any breakfast food. Maybe I haven’t?”

He got a thoughtful look and hummed, tapping his chin.

“Hmm... Nope. I can’t remember. I guess it doesn’t matter- Anyway, we’ve got a big day today! I was looking at the map and by my calculations we could probably head eastward out of Berryburg and then head north and that should shave off a good fifteen minutes. Plus, if we can take a shortcut through the studio-.”

Ed was waking up slowly, so he listened to Rambley prattle while paying only half attention. Most of his focus more devoted to eating the eggs and holding out his hand for more. They didn’t taste like they’d

give him food poisoning, so he trusted Rambley's judgement.

"-just in case we run into some unwanted company."

Wait, what?

"What?" Ed asked, now waking up the rest of the way.

"Don't worry about it. That's not going to happen," Rambley waved off. "I've got it all planned out. Trust me!"

Ed did. He really did and really, really wanted to... but it wouldn't be the first time a plan went awry. Case in point: the entirety of yesterday.

For a second Ed felt the faintest tinge of anxiety at the thought of wandering through the park with Rambley, but he shot that down quickly. Last night didn't change anything.

It was going to go fine. And it was going to go fine because he was going to make sure it went fine. They were going to take every precaution they could. So, he made sure his phone was charged enough, grabbed his pack on their way out, and kept his worries to himself.

Due to the lack of time, they decided to pass on any stops along the way and instead made their way straight through.

Though Rambley did point out Raspberry's pink house as they walked by. It was a boxy, pink, oversized dollhouse looking thing. Now seeing it in person, Ed was a little curious. He made a mental note to take a look inside on the way back.

They continued out of Berryburg and along the next path until it led alongside a swampy looking lake along the way. The fountains dotting around it had all shut down and the cruise boat that once paddled around it was now stranded on a mini island in the middle of it. A collapsed and peeling Finley statue

slouched alongside it. Something about the image gave off an eerie vibe.

“Hey, Eddie. Would you mind doing me a favor?”
Rambley asked.

“Sure. What?”

Rambley had a sneaky little smile. “Close your eyes.”

He was clearly planning something. Ed closed his eyes. Rambley took his arm and began to lead him along.

“How far are we going?”

“Not that far! Just about the length of Main Street.”

“Huh. Can I look at my feet?”

“Only if you keep from peeking!”

While this was a little weird, Ed trusted Rambley enough to go along with it. Even when he was watching the ground change around his feet and could tell they were getting away from the lake.

“We’re almost there...”

They passed through an entranceway and another set of turnstiles before they finally stopped.

“Okay, Eddie! Take a look!”

Ed uncovered his eyes and looked up.

“Welcome... to INDIGO STUDIOS!”

And it was like he had taken a step back in time. Indigo Studios looked almost as good as it did when it was open.

The whole place was stylized to look like a ritzy studio. The lowering sun brought out the full effect in the orange-pink stucco buildings and there were

palm trees lining down the road- fake ones, likely. They looked too good to be real.

But while some of the outer buildings had crumbled, with even a large hole in the road off one way, the main street down the boulevard was largely untouched. Aged, but still resembled its prime.

“Wow.”

“Pretty amazing, isn’t it?” Rambley asked with a toothy grin. He folded his arms behind him. “There’s not too many rides close by so I’m guessing you probably didn’t spend much time here during your visits.”

“Actually, this is my first time.”

Rambley’s eyes went wide. “Wait. You’ve never been here before?... That’s great! Ohh, I’ve been waiting to find someplace you hadn’t ever been before! Lemme give you the grand tour!”

His tail swished in excitement as he grabbed Ed's hand and began to lead him down the center road.

“So, just so you know, this was an ACTUAL studio. Not like those places that pretend they're a studio but are really just a bunch of stage shows and smoke and mirrors. There were real offices here used to make many of the later year Indigo productions. Remember that Christmas movie I told you about? It was made in-house here! And there were a bunch of exclusive cartoons that you could only watch in these theaters!”

“That's crazy. Do you think any of them are still running?”

“Of course! OH, look, look!” Rambley pointed to the posters on a nearby wall. “You remember these from outside my railroad?”

Ed did. There was one of Rambley and Mollie in a plane, with him holding on for dear life. One of him and Lloyd on stage together, with Rambley looking notably peeved. The only one he didn't recognize

was one of him riding on Finley's back as they were going through a flooded cave, with Rambley wearing a little caver hat.

"These are all park-exclusive cartoons! Well, those two weren't always exclusives, but now the only place you can watch them are in these theaters!... And, uh... Online. I noticed there were some copies leaked online."

Ed made a mental note to look those up later.

"Hey! Maybe later we can come back here and watch a couple," Rambley offered.

"I'm down. I want to see what Lloyd did to make you get that face," Ed joked.

Rambley snickered. "It's a date!"

He squeezed Ed's hand. Then he continued leading him along.

“See that snazzy building down there? That’s the Blind Mice Squeakeasy, the fanciest adult beverage restaurant in the entire park!” Rambley said, pointing to a building further down the street.

“You mean a bar?” Ed teased.

“Well, if you want to get technical,” Rambley tsked. “I hear they used to make the best Molltinis around. And probably the only Molltinis in existence. They used the same syrup as Bird Up in the mix.”

“Huh, sounds...”

Actually, that sounded like something that was either decently good or downright disgusting.

“...Have you ever had one?”

“Me?! No way! I’m an icon, Eddie. I can’t drink that stuff.”

“You’ve never been curious?”

“...Well, maybe a little...” Rambley said lowly into his hand, as though it was some sort of dirty secret. He cleared his throat and changed the subject.

“*Ahem* And just around the corner over there is a huge theater- much grander than the Main Stage Theater! In fact, it’s called the Grand Musical Hall for that exact reason! That’s where they performed musicals with costumed performers. See, the Main Stage Theater was mostly devoted to watching Lloyd prance around. And nobody once to dance on stage with that guy sucking up attention.”

“Maybe this is my sore back talking, but I don’t think I’d feel comfortable dancing around with Lloyd either.”

“Are you sure? Because you’ve been tangoing with him a lot recently,” Rambley playfully joked. Briefly disguising a small scowl at the end.

Ed was surprised that he could joke about that, but then caught that look and chuckled.

“I had to do it, Buddy. What do they call it? I need to get my...” He snapped his fingers a few times. “I had to get my lion’s share,”

“Oh, good grief.” Rambley put a hand to his forehead.

“You’re smiling.”

“Begrudgingly.”

Yeah, Ed wasn’t so sure about that.

The two continued walking down the cracked sidewalk. The once neatly cut grass and bushes were overgrown, but the street itself was in much better condition than Main Street. It looked like a park that had been closed for only a year at max, not eight.

Most of the windows were one-way reflective, with Ed able to see himself in them. He looked so out of place next to Rambley. Not that it bothered him, it was just a little reminder that things were off.

Ed saw Rambley's reflection point down the street.

"Now see that big building at the end of the road?
That's where we're going!"

Looking ahead, Ed focused on the building in question. One that looked sort of like a Hollywood studio proper, though with grand frosted glass doors and palm trees out front.

"That's where they begin the tours through the studios, but more importantly we can cut right through and come out on the road to the sphere! Without having to take the long way down past the County Critter Celebration."

Oh yeah, the Possum show. Maybe he had been here before, because he definitely remembered that.

As they walked up to the building a strange funky smell started to permeate the air. It was nothing like Salem's perfume smell or the gas scent. Instead, it was something sour and ammonia-like.

Rambley noticed it as well as he slowed to a stop, his eyes darting around shiftily.

“Wait a minute...” Rambley sniffed the air. “Do you smell that?”

“I smell something,” Ed agreed, scrunching up his nose. “That’s not Salem, right?”

“No. Not them.”

It wasn’t just rotten food either, or mildew. It was much sharper, but not like blood or dead animal. It almost smelled like animal urine...

Rambley’s ears and shoulders drooped. “Oh no.”

“What?”

“Remember when I said Salem was the biggest bully in the park?”

“Yeah?” Ed didn’t like where this was going.

“Well, I forgot about Barlow. Barlow’s the biggest bully in the park,” Rambley muttered. He sniffed again and wrinkled his nose. “And it smells like he’s been all over here.”

“Barlow? I don’t remember him.”

“Y’know, Barlow the Bully.”

“...Wait, maybe I do. Was he a dog?”

“YYYup. And a big one at that. And he’s even bigger than that!” Rambley gave Ed a nervous smile. “Let’s do ourselves a big favor and maybe try to avoid him.”

“Will the Critter Cuff work on him?” Ed asked, growing nervous himself.

“Definitely, but the problem is that Barlow’s a ‘bite first, ask questions later’ sort of guy. The Critter Cuff will run him off, but I wouldn’t put it past him to come flying in for a quick chomp before it did.”

“Oh yeah, that’s what we need. A strange dog bite. What’s the chance that Indigo Park gave him all his shots?” Ed cracked.

“Pretty good! But that’s not going to stop a chomp from hurting like the dickens. But at least we won’t start foaming at the mouth.”

That joke led to a very disturbing mental image of a rabid Rambley that Ed just wasn’t prepared for—probably because it twisted itself into that disturbed old mascot Rambley in his mind.

“I’d prefer to not become a chew toy so let’s try to sneak through quickly, okay?” Rambley requested.

Ed nodded with a hum of agreement.

They walked up to the front doors only to have them not respond. Rambley walked forward and backward, trying to trigger the automatic door. He hummed and unfocused, rubbing his chin, and then snapped his fingers.

“Power’s out. I should’ve expected it. Let’s see...”

He unfocused again, looking through a mental map, and then started pulling Ed along. “Let’s go try the side door.”

They went around the edge of the building to a tight space tucked around the corner. There was a standard metal bench and a Rambley trashcan outside of a simple ‘employees only’ door. Probably where the employees came to take any smoking breaks. There looked like there was an alleyway behind it and between the buildings, but it was blocked by a tall brick wall.

Rambley tried the door and brightened up with a beaming smile when he found it unlocked. “Jackpot!”

He pushed open the door and stuck his head inside. Ed watched his ears shoot up and he suddenly went rigid. Then he yanked his head back and turned it away, pulling the door in but not letting it close as his eyes unfocused again. Darting around panicked but then getting a look of frustration or exasperation-

because the power was out, of course the cameras wouldn't work.

Then he looked back at the door and cautiously closed it, taking back his hand from Ed's so that he could make sure the door closed as slowly and as quietly as possible.

When he turned back, he had a tense smile.

"Hey, how about we go another way?"

"Which way?" Ed asked.

"Any way that's not this way."

Now that was a bad sign if he had ever heard one, but Ed wasn't about to argue. Especially not after Rambley crept away from the backdoor.

Ed waited until they were coming around the edge of the building to ask.

"What did you see?" he whispered.

“I-I didn’t see much. It just... smelled... like a lot of things that we don’t want to walk up on. Barlow included.”

Rambley chuckled nervously and they continued to walk back to the street.

Until they were caught off guard by an almighty bang against the frosted glass doors to the right.

Both snapped their heads over to see a form pressed up against the glass. It was too opaque to make out the details, but there was a big head pressing against the glass. Still smooshed up against the door it began to bark.

BRAOOWF!

Though maybe bellow was a better work for it. A bellow that caused those doors to shake just as badly as when its paws or fists pounding on it. The details were impossible to make out, but the vague outline was clear enough, and the size was worrying.

“Come on,” Rambley whispered.

He ducked around the corner of the gate and began to speedily walk down the sidewalk. Ed caught up quickly and matched his pace. They could still hear the barking and banging.

“Don’t worry, he’s not getting through there,” Rambley assured. “That’s reinforced glass! There’s no way-!”

He was interrupted by a loud bang followed by the sound of shattering glass.

Rambley didn’t say anything. Neither did Ed. They just began running as fast as they could.

They got further down the street before Rambley grabbed Ed’s hand and yanked him into a nearby alleyway.

Unfortunately, this alleyway too ended shortly in a brick wall that went up too high to scale, and there

was nothing else there except a dumpster and some abandoned garbage bags.

Ed started to look up and around for a way out and he noticed a window not too high up. He could get a running start and just grab onto the ledge, then if he could shimmy down, he could reach a fire escape just above the wall. From there they could make it over or even continue to the roof.

A splash of orange caught his attention on the fire escape, and he shielded his eyes from the sun to see. Much to his surprise, there was something already up there.

It was an orange tabby cat sunning itself up on the fire escape. It had to be a stray, but it looked healthy. Especially considering that there was a giant dog running around.

“Hey, maybe we could-,” Ed began.

He turned back just in time to see Rambley quietly opening the dumpster and frantically waving for him to get in.

“Okay, never mind.”

Ed spared one look at the climb again before taking Rambley’s suggestion and climbing into the dumpster. Rambley hopped in after him and quietly shut the lid after them.

As he went to sit down, something slid underneath his hand. He patted around, looked down, and gasped before digging into the trash. Ed looked to him with confusion and Rambley turned back with a plate clutched in his hands and a big grin.

In the very limited light from the crack of the dumpster lid and through the grime on it, Ed could make out the picture of a Rambley head with a red bowtie and top hat. And a big smile that almost rivaled the actual Rambley’s just above it.

“Collector’s plate!” Rambley mouthed. He eagerly handed it over.

Ed took it and wiped away some of the dried dirt- or what he hoped was dirt- to see the words “Indigo Park” around the rim at the top and “Indigo Studios” at the bottom.

Rambley was sure to tell him about this later. He carefully slipped it into his backpack for later.

Then they waited, and for a moment it seemed like they had already lost Barlow.

But then thunderous footsteps rushed into the alleyway and something giant began to thump and bang around. Even banging into the side of the dumpster and causing the whole thing to shift. Both held on for dear life.

Ed tried to peek out, but it was no good. The crack was so slim that the only way he could see through would be if he lifted the lid, and he didn’t trust that it wouldn’t make a noise. So, they were left in the dark.

But he could hear it heaving and snorting. It had caught their scent.

Ed felt around for Rambley's arm and then followed it down before taking his hand. Rambley looked to him. His large, glassy eyes just visible in the fainty light from the crack of the dumpster. He was scared. But he squeezed back, and he didn't take his eyes off Ed.

And then...

Barlow suddenly began to bark so loudly that the vibrations shook the dumpster. He had found something- but it wasn't them. It was aimed in the opposite direction, and Ed could hear him scratching at the wall and the heavy jumps of it trying to clamor up the wall.

The cat, Ed realized. Barlow saw the cat.

And just as quickly as Barlow came in, he barreled out of the alley again. Knocking into the edge of the

dumpster and taking out a trashcan in the process. Within seconds his footsteps faded away.

They waited for a few minutes before Rambley carefully lifted the lid. He lifted an ear and listened carefully. Sure enough, he could still hear Barlow making a mess somewhere nearby, but not close enough that he could hear them. He lifted the lid more and waved for Ed to get out.

Once out, Rambley crept to the edge of the alley, waving for Ed to stay back, and peeked around the corner. He caught sight of Barlow tearing into an old food stall that they had walked past, gulped, and stepped back into the alley.

“He’s right over there,” Rambley said. He put a hand to his head and one on his hip. “This is not good.”

Ed looked up at the fire escape. That was a possibility.

“And worse, he’s blocking our way to the sphere!” Rambley huffed.

“Is there another way around?” Ed asked.

“Hmm... Wait!” Rambley snapped his fingers. “We could go through Haunted Hollow!”

“The haunted castle?”

“The area around the haunted castle, specifically. There’s a back exit that leads to the train station- the train that circles the park, not my railroad- and from there we should be at the sphere in no time!”

That sounded like an idea, but Ed was more than a little skeptical.

“What’s stopping Big Guy from following us over there?”

“That’s the best part! Haunted Hollow is blocked off by this big, ornate gate that I know for a fact is going to be CLOSED. Sooo, we hop the gate and ditch the dog! Easy-peasy.”

Of the few plans Ed had to deal with the deranged mascots, this was one of the better ones. Leave him at the gate, hope he can't break through.

"Sounds like a plan. Let's do it!"

"Great! But, uh, one problem. And that problem is him hanging out in the street looking for us."

"No problem. We'll just climb over the wall," Ed said, pointing a thumb back at it.

Rambley looked up, and up, and got a skeptically forced smile.

"That's a little higher than I'm used to. Don't get me wrong, I'm a pretty good climber, but that's a sheer brick wall. I don't think I'm getting up it. Unless you're planning on tossing me over, in which case I'll pass."

"No, it's easy! I'll boost you up to the window and you jump to the fire escape. I'll follow behind you."

Rambley looked up worriedly between the wall and the window.

“Are you sure you can do that?”

“Sure! I used to do stuff like this all the time.”

Rambley still looked uncertain.

“Hey. It’s no worse than climbing down the Ferris wheel,” Ed offered gently.

“I’m more worried about you than me,” Rambley admitted with a small smile. “How’d you break that tooth again?”

“Bad landing.”

That didn’t seem to assure Rambley much but turning his head to listen and hearing Barlow still nearby... he sighed defeatedly.

“I guess we have no choice.”

“That’s the spirit.”

Ed went under the window and cupped his hands to boost. Rambley drug his feet a little longer before stepping up and getting lifted to the window ledge. He managed to easily pull himself up though.

He balanced on the edge with his back to the glass and turned his attention to the fire escape. He steeled his nerves before leaping. He grabbed onto the railing and began to climb over only to hear an ominous squeak.

He looked up in time to see the emergency ladder starting to slide.

“No, no, no-!” He lunged for it to try and catch it, but just missed and the ladder dropped down with a loud clatter.

Ed didn’t hesitate. He heard that and knew he had seconds to get out. He backed up for a running start, scrambling up the wall and hooking his arm on the ledge to pull himself up.

He jumped for the fire escape without much time to ready himself and missed the railing, but just managed to grab the bars. He got his feet on the wall beneath him and used the friction to climb his way up.

A large form barreled into the alley and he was nearly deafened by monstrous barking and Rambley's frantic, "Ed, Ed, ED!"

He just barely got himself up and onto the railing enough to pull his legs out of reach of the enormous jaws of a huge bulldog. Or what was supposed to be one. Looking down Ed got his first look at Barlow and sure enough, he recognized the character.

Barlow was only a shred smaller than Lloyd. His fur was a mucky dark blue color, dingy and dirty from years of running around on his own. His chest puffed up and bowed over, its legs stout and paws large.

Strangely, his front paws, which were currently scraping on the bricks beneath them, were large,

leathery, and black. As though to resemble the leather gloves he sported in later cartoons. Though they were clearly not gloves, just tough, course skin. Like his hand was nothing but inflamed paw pads.

Though these details weren't the ones Ed was looking at initially. That would be his wide mouth filled with yellowish teeth. Some of them missing, drool and saliva foaming up around his comically large jowls and leaking off his chin and spraying onto Ed's legs as it barked and chomped.

Its eyes were small and beady black with a thick pink ring of irritated skin wrapping around them. There was a large black patch of fur around one eye- perhaps as a stand in for his eyepatch since it was unlikely anyone could keep one on him. One ear was torn from what looked like an old wound. More mucus was leaking from his small, crunched nose, which hissed with each bark.

He really looked the part for the junkyard dog that Barlow the Bully was supposed to be. Smelled like it

too. Throwing all his strength into trying to jump up and clamp down on Ed's ankle.

Then the Critter Cuff went off and Barlow yelped and turned tail just as quickly. He raced out of the alleyway on all fours and was gone. For now.

Rambley grabbed Ed by the arm and helped hoist him up onto the fire escape.

"Are you okay? He didn't getcha, did he?"

"No, but that was way too close," Ed said breathlessly. "I think I got some of his slobber on my shoes."

"Ugh."

"Look at it." Ed pointed out a clump of slime and Rambley cringed in disgust.

"That's very... gross. But that's not the worst of it. Knowing Barlow, the Critter Cuff won't keep him

away for long. He doesn't have a great attention span."

"So, what's the plan?"

"Same plan as five minutes ago. Down the hatch, down the alley, and hop the gate," Rambley said. He then hopped onto the fallen ladder and slid to the bottom. "Hurry up!"

Ed didn't need to be told twice. He climbed down and they stepped into the back alley.

The back alley was in worse condition than the other side. The path to the left, which would've hopefully led them to behind the building and to the sphere, was partially collapsed in and steep enough that it didn't look feasible to climb without risking it crumbling onto them. The way to the right, the way towards Haunted Hollow, was open but piled with trash.

It was as though something singlehandedly ran through here and tore open and dragged around

every single trash bag and trash can. Ed didn't want to point fingers, but Barlow was looking like the likely culprit.

Old Styrofoam crunched underfoot as the two made their way down the tight space behind the buildings. Rambley leading the way with Ed close behind.

They had gotten almost a quarter of the way down when suddenly a familiar form skirted around the corner at the end and blocked the way with their beefy form. It was Barlow, and he began bounding down the alleyway towards them.

"Go back! Go back!" Rambley yelped.

Ed didn't need to be told twice. He turned and started to run with the raccoon shortly on his heels, and Barlow closing in behind that.

They wouldn't make it back to the fire escape. Instead, Ed grabbed for a door they passed. Locked. He ran to the next and tried and it swung open. Rambley squeezed in before he could say anything

and Ed yanked the door closed behind him, pulling against the resistance trying to slow the door's closing.

The only lock was a small cuff reader by the door, but Ed didn't want to risk unlocking it. He just shut the door and backed up, and a second later there was a loud bang. Barlow began to ram and scrape at the door.

But he couldn't open it. His clumsy, bloated, thumb-less paws smacking at the handle but being unable to pull it open.

"That should hold him for a while!" Rambley shout-whispered. He grabbed Ed's wrist and started to drag him out the front door. "Come on!"

They ran out the front and began to run down the sidewalk again. At the end of the road was a tunnel leading under the train tram tracks and into another section of the park, likely Haunted Hollow. If they could just make it there, they'd be home free.

Except the barking was getting closer again. Still beyond the building but gaining fast. Ed looked down the next alley as they passed and felt his stomach drop when it was blocked by a chain length fence gate instead of a brick wall. If it could just hold for a second-

A BANGing CRUNCHing noise rang out and then suddenly Barlow skidded out of the alley and was directly on their heels.

“HOW?!” Rambley choked.

He took a sharp left and shoved through the front door of a gift shop, intending to lose him there. Ed was close behind.

And so was Barlow, who outright both smashed through and broke down the metal and glass door. He then barged through, knocking down stands of plushies, post cards, and plenty of other memorabilia.

Ed barely dodged him by staying to the left wall while Rambley raced through and dove over the counter. Barlow tried to come over after him but got stuck on the mound of junk he brought with him, giving Rambley a second to crawl to freedom to the back of the store and out the back door with Ed.

They could hear things crashing and clattering inside. Rambley winced at the amount of good merchandise getting smashed to bits.

“Talk about a bull in a China shop...” he muttered.

“Good one,” Ed whispered.

“Thanks, but you haven’t seen nothing yet.”

Rambley unfocused and quickly started to search for the closest announcement speaker.

Unlike the buildings themselves, which were usually kept on their own circuit, the information kiosks and overhead speakers were on their own line. This was so that guests could still be guided out of the park in

case of an emergency. It certainly came in handy now.

He located one outside of the building Barlow had barged out of initially and hooked on. Then he turned up the volume from the inside and started to project his voice. The whispers behind his hand becoming a loud and impossible to ignore announcement.

“DOWN HERE, YOU BIG BULLY! YEAH, I’M TALKING TO YOU, BARLOW! YOU ARE IN BIG TROUBLE, BUDDY! NOW YOU GET YOUR CURLY LITTLE TAIL OVER HERE!”

At first Barlow ignored it, but after the rant continued Ed noticed that he had stopped banging around and went still. Obviously, he was listening. He stopped listening when he stormed right back out of the gift shop barking and huffing, and smashing anything left underneath his feet on the way out.

Rambley kept ranting for a few seconds longer.

“I MEAN IT, BUSTER! IF YOU THINK I’M GONNA WAIT HERE FOREVER THEN OH BOY-!” “-Okay, let’s go.”

And then they were back to running down the tight alleyway. They made it to the end and through a tight passage back onto the street, pushing past an ‘Employee’s Only!’ standee blocking them, and coming out back on the sidewalk. Now it was a straight shot down to and through the tunnel.

Rambley looked back down the street and got a look of panic.

“Oh HECK! Run!”

He made a break for the tunnel. Ed looked back down the road before following, catching sight of Barlow standing outside of the tour building. But instead of having gone inside, he was standing there staring in their direction.

Meaning that he had spotted them. Meaning that they had to get to and over that fence fast.

Ed bolted into the tunnel after Rambley. It was pitch dark inside, but enough of the light spilled in from either side that he was able to keep his bearings. His footsteps echoing around him.

He went around a gentle corner, and he saw the other side. The entrance partially collapsed and there was a little rubble in the way but he could see the large faux-rustic gate beyond it. Stylized with sharp pointed ends and a cast iron “B” mounted in the center. He watched Rambley clamor over that imposing gate in a matter of seconds.

But he started to notice that his footsteps were the only ones he was hearing. Heavy thumps were gaining fast along with a low guttural growl and heaving hissing breaths. Barlow was closing in fast.

Ed’s vision tunneled as his heart pounded in his chest. He only had one chance. One slip and it wouldn’t be pretty.

So, he made that chance count. He jumped up onto the gate and climbed up and swung his legs over a split second before Barlow rammed into it. The jolt of his impact knocking Ed off and causing him to land heavily on his hands and knees. He barely felt it with how much adrenaline was pumping through his veins.

The Critter Cuff went off and Barlow buckled off the gate immediately. He yelped and raced off with his tail between his legs, figuratively.

“That’s right! Get out of here! Big jerk...” Rambley called after him. He then ran to Ed’s side. “Are you okay? That was a hard fall!”

“Yeah, just... Yeah.” Ed checked his palms and seeing that they weren’t scraped, dusted them off on his jeans. “I’m good.”

“No loose teeth?”

“No looser than usual.”

“Good! Whew...” Rambley dropped to the ground beside him and sat there trying to catch his breath.

Ed turned over and sat alongside him, the two looking at the gate, the tunnel, and thankfully not the giant bulldog.

Another close call... Crazy that Rambley didn't know Barlow was out here. He mentioned him once, didn't he? Ed hadn't even thought about it until now. But then again, he seemed shocked too. Guess he really couldn't be sure of where the mascots were when he was stuck in one place for so long. Especially when the power was out.

“That was crazy,” Ed simply said.

“Tell me about it! Where did he even come from?! Well, I guess he chose the best place to scavenge through garbage...” Rambley mumbled.

Well, that answered Ed's question before he asked it. Barlow wasn't supposed to be here. Of course, Rambley didn't know. Whatever little disconcerting

thoughts were creeping up were quickly shot back down.

“Think he’ll find another way in?” Ed asked.

“He can try but he won’t! This whole place is walled in by this spooky yet elegantly decorated gating!” Rambley said proudly. Though then he got an unsure look. “Unless part of the gate fell in... Eh, I think we’ve got a minute.”

Ed nodded and went back to sitting. Then slipped off his pack and pulled it into his lap, fishing out the collector’s plate and holding it out to Rambley.

“Can I get a Rambley review of this?”

Rambley grinned.

“I think I could scare up a Rambley Recap! Let’s see...”

He took the plate in his hands and began to wipe it off with his arm, or the sleeve of his suit.

“This is one of the anniversary edition collector plates! I’m not sure for which anniversary though. Honestly, they made a new set every year and they didn’t always switch out the designs. But they were all very valuable! I can’t imagine why anyone would throw this away! Oh, there’s why.”

He turned it over and only then noticed a large chip on the back of the plate. It was surprising that the whole thing hadn’t cracked through.

“Still, it’s pretty neat. And a whole set would be worth something, dings or not. Shame Barlow had to go wreck the gift shop, there were probably plenty of these babies in there,” Rambley sighed.

“Makes this one more valuable,” Ed offered.

“I guess it does! An Indigo Park original! Hopefully someday we get to make more of these.”

Rambley stared at the plate and his smiling face stared back. For some reason he got a weird feeling

looking at it and he wasn't sure why. He had seen plenty of merchandise and hadn't felt funny about it before.

...Maybe it was because he knew deep in his gut that there could never be another original.

Or maybe that was just his nerves after that run-in with Barlow making his stomach twist. Or maybe the eggs. Maybe both.

“You look pretty cute with a bowtie.”

Rambley scoffed a little and handed the plate back. Ed put it into his pack.

“Now you be careful with that! Someday that'll be worth a fortune, and we'll need that money to fund any future projects. In the meantime-.” Rambley hopped to his feet. “Ready to keep going?”

Ed gave a thumbs up and got up. Then the two turned their attention to the attraction that lay before them and the ominous castle standing tall ahead.

The day was almost over, but their journey had only just begun. The Haunted Hollow was as incredible as Ed remembered it being.

It consisted of four notable locations. Firstly, a restaurant stylized like a medieval pub with an outdoor seating area off to the left. Off to the right was a hedge and topiary maze that looked like it had gotten a little overgrown. There were some stalls and a fountain with a bat gargoyle in the center in between them.

The two attractions were Mineshaft Drop, an indoor dark-ride coaster inside of what looked like an old warehouse, and the Haunted Castle itself which, as the name would imply, looked like a small but spooky castle.

Of all the places in the park, this was the only place where the overgrowing foliage, cracked pathing, and otherwise abandoned look made it look better. Ed could've believed that this was on purpose if there were people here and music playing.

To Ed, it looked just as creepy as it was when he was a kid.

“I can’t believe this place held up so well. Look at it!” Ed said.

Rambley perked up at Ed’s smile. “I know! It must have something to do with the fact that there aren’t any major tunnels that run under here. Which I suspect are the source of the structural instability in other sections of the park. This place is just as ghastly and grim as ever! Maybe even a little more.”

Rambley unfocused briefly to check if the power was on. As expected, it wasn’t.

“The power’s out here, but we could probably get it back on if you wanted to explore a little. I think I recall you saying you rode on the Haunted Castle?”

“All the time! It was one of my favorite rides!”

“Really?! Well, now we’ve gotta get it up and working! Let me just see where the backup generator is.” Rambley unfocused again before pointing towards the pub. “This way!”

“What about the labs?”

“They’re not going anywhere!”

Well... Good point. Besides, Ed wasn’t about to turn down a blast to the past like the Haunted Castle.

He sort of underplayed how big of a deal it was to him. If there was one part of the park he was really looking forward to, this was it. This was a huge part of his memories at Indigo Park.

They went around behind the pub to a little fenced in area and an employee’s only door hidden on the back of the building. Surprisingly it was unlocked and opened into a short stairwell. Rambley led Ed downstairs. It was almost jarring how quickly they stepped from a medieval exterior to a cold, office-like basement.

At the bottom was a little hall with three doors. Rambley led him to the one at the back, which had a yellow, triangle warning sign with a lightning bolt on it. Opening it revealed a small electrical room and in the way back was another Indigo Park brand Violet Generator. One with three thick cords leading from it and not a single gear in place.

“Uh oh. Looks like someone took the gears out again. I’m starting to think these were vandalized by somebody,” Rambley said.

“By who?” Ed asked.

But then he thought about it, and then he and Rambley answered at the same time.

“Salem.”

Rambley sighed before tenting his fingers and giving Ed an apologetic grin.

“Looks like it’s time for another game of Huckle Buckle Gearwheel. Think you’re up to it, Rangler?”

“Sure,” Ed said. He looked around before spotting a dirty cardboard box and went over to check inside.

“Great! You check this room, and I’ll go check the next one. I’m sure they didn’t get far. Hey, we could even make a real game out of it! Like a race to see who can get them first. All we need is a good wager-.”

“Wait! I think they’re in here.” Ed pulled some junk out of the box and sure enough, there were the gears hidden neatly in the bottom. “Yup, this is them.”

“Oh, thank Indigo!” Rambley said, betraying his relief. He quickly caught himself. “Erm, I mean-!... No, I meant that,” he said defeatedly.

“So I won, right?” Ed joked.

“Heh, I guess so! It’s a shame you didn’t win a few seconds later or you might’ve gotten something pretty neat. But I guess bragging rights aren’t so bad!”

“How about if we get the Haunted Castle working, you let me get a couple of pictures around the place? Off the track,” Ed asked.

“Off the track? You mean walking around in the restricted area?”

“Nah, just around the castle.”

“That’s what I- never mind. Well... Okay! But you need to keep close to the ride, alright? I know it looks like a big, fancy castle, but once you get out of view of the ride everything becomes gears and electrical wires. It could be dangerous. Not to mention a lot less photogenic.”

Technically that was a huge safety violation, but he’d make an exception. Ed was always the exception to the rule, it seemed.

“It’s a deal. Here.”

Ed handed off the two smaller gears to Rambley who carried them over and placed them on the generator. He set the third, heaviest one himself. Then Rambley strode to the lever and grabbed it with both hands before pulling down with all his might.

It barely budged. He huffed and pulled harder, and the lever squeaked as it slowly slid down a little further. But he had to hold it with all his might to keep it from springing back up.

“Want me to...?” Ed offered.

“Mmph! No, I’ve... got it...!” Rambley said through gritted teeth. He threw his weight into it and finally started to get it moving a little more. “Just a little... more!”

But that little more wasn’t coming easily.

Finally, he gave an exasperated huff and tilted his head back to look at Ed, fully tilted on his heels trying to move the lever with all he had.

“I might need an extra pair of hands.”

Ed stepped up and grabbed the lever above Rambley’s hands and pulled. There was a lot of resistance. It had to be rusted or gunked up somewhere in the lever, but when Ed threw his whole weight into it, it finally snapped down and started the generator. Rambley tumbling onto the floor on his back before getting offered a hand up.

“There we go! That’s the power of teamwork! Thank you,” Rambley said. He dusted off his hands and planted them on his hips. “Phew, talk about a workout. I think all those years of sitting around at home hasn’t been helping my arm strength.”

“Hey, it took me two tries,” Ed said. He clicked off his flashlight, which he had pinned under his arm while pulling the lever. The small room bathed in the light

of a flickering florescent bulb. “Think that’s enough to get the castle working?”

“Are you kidding? These little babies pack a lot of power! Not unlike a certain raccoon who, uh... Well, I can still lift my own body weight. That must count for something,” Rambley remarked with a flick of his tail. “But we’ll have to go check! Haunted Hollow looks pretty untouched; surely the ride’s rarin’ to go!”

Ed peeked into the other rooms- a small security office and a tiny storage room- and upon finding nothing of note the two headed out of the basement.

Some of the lamps had come on along with the main light inside of the pub. It looked warm and cozy inside. Had there not been pressure to get to the labs before dark, Ed would’ve asked to go poke around inside. Maybe on the way back.

Instead, they headed towards the Haunted Castle.

The outside kiosk led through a short section of overgrown garden before passing through a smaller

ornate gate and into a courtyard. The stones making up the pathway were covered in moss and slick in places. The graves that peeked out from behind hedges were now totally engulfed by them.

Various cutouts of Rambley and his friends looking spooked lined the trail. Rambley with chill lines and a grimace, Mollie with her eyes closed, and Lloyd looking intense and a little unnerved. All of them faded from years left outside. The Finley one, ironically, was so waterlogged that it had sunk to the ground.

Ed started to take pictures right away and continued as they walked through the open doors into a short hallway. One lined with paintings with deep red carpet and matching peeling wallpaper. Eerie howling wind and creaking floorboard ambience played through the crunchy speaker overhead.

There was a large screen hanging from the ceiling at the end of the hallway, but it was dangling from its wiring and blackened out. It was totally busted, and Rambley didn't even try to use it for anything.

Instead, he turned his attention to Ed. He had never seen him this eager before.

“Are you excited?” he asked, already suspecting what the answer would be.

“Yes! I never thought I’d get another chance to ride this after the place closed. Especially once I saw the park... No offense. I just meant with the power out and the place closed-.”

“Come on, Eddie. We both know what you meant,” Rambley said knowingly. “And no offense taken.”

“I remember the first time I rode this. I wanted to ride it the second I saw it, but my mom said we should wait until after dark. So, we did, and it was great! It added a whole different feeling walking out afterwards.”

“Oh wow, that sounds very immersive! What do you think, should we wait until dark too?”

“...No thanks. I don’t want to wait that long,” Ed confessed.

Admittedly, neither did Rambley.

Ed started taking pictures of the large paintings on the wall. There were four of them lining each side of the hallway. All of them were still in perfect condition because they were sealed in thin protective glass, save some dust or smudges.

The first was of a raccoon bandit standing on some old western railroad tracks with the train rushing up behind him. He smiled mischievously, oblivious to the danger. This was Rambley’s great-great-great grandfather, the mysterious Masked Menace.

The second was of a pirate parrot walking the plank with a circle of shark fins in the water below. That was Molly’s great-great-great aunt Polly Pluckfeathers.

The next was a fierce looking sea monster whose head was mounted on a plaque above a fireplace in

the painting. That was Finley's distant ancestor Levi Leviathan.

And finally, there was a roaring lion jumping through fiery hoops on a tight rope- and it looked like he was about to miss the landing. That was Lionford the Magnificent, not that anyone would remember.

All of these were supposed ancestors of the main gang who met unfortunate fates. Of course, that wasn't the case at all. These characters were made ages after the original cast and save Polly getting her own section in the park, none of the others showed up anywhere else.

Which was a shame, Rambley thought. He wouldn't have minded a big family tree to brag about. Even if it wasn't real.

On the other wall were four more paintings that someone would pass on the way out. They were styled similarly, continuations of the paintings.

First was of Lionford tangled up in a net from where he had fallen off the tight rope. A rope even catching around his mouth and stopping his roar.

Then was one of the mounted plaque with a big empty hole in it. A section of long, squirmy tail could be seen on the floor as Levi seemingly wriggled away.

Next was Polly standing proudly atop two sharks, a foot on each, with her wings on her hips. The sharks looked like they had been beat up and knocked out.

And finally, the Masked Menace goofily stuck to the front of the train getting carried off with it. All's well that ends well! Rambley was sure guests would appreciate the levity.

But maybe not the silence. It felt like they were missing something... Oh, of course! Normally there was a narrator here, but he hadn't triggered the audio. Rambley was so busy chatting that he forgot that he was supposed to be doing something.

But why worry about the narrator anyways when Ed probably heard it a dozen times already? He needed something new and fresh! Perhaps a lovable tour guide even. Rambley snapped his fingers.

“Track Facts! I knew I was missing something! Did you know that the earliest version of the Haunted Castle ride was Rambley & Pals themed? That right, my friends and I were the characters on the ride in cut-out form! But then under the major rehaul in the mid-80s, the ride was rethemed to feature the Battums Family instead! And did you also know that the Battums family aren’t Indigo Originals? It’s true! They were acquired by Indigo sometime in the late 70s, but it wasn’t until their debut on the ride that they became a real big deal. And now they feature in a ton of Indigo films of their own! There was even a crossover with yours truly.”

“I know, I had it on tape. I used to watch it all the time!” Ed said.

“Eeheehee! I should’ve figured,” Rambley said happily. “What was your favorite part?”

“The carriage chase for sure.”

“Ooo, that’s a good one.”

“I used to reenact it with my toys whenever it came on. And that whole part with the ghosts in the graveyard! You know we should rewatch that later.”

“We sure should! I might even be able to get that projected directly onto my TV!” Rambley said excitedly. “But that’s for later. Let’s head in!”

The doors passed into a long set of zig-zag halls, likely too made to hold lines. Mini chandeliers hung from the ceiling and the walls were covered in creepy paintings of bat people. One depicting a dark hallway with the shadows of two small creatures on the ceiling at the end, another being a still life picture of a suspicious bottle of deep red liquid.

The most noticeable was large bridal painting where the bride’s veil was too thick to see through to her face. But a pair of long ears stuck out from

underneath, and her bouquet was gripped by clawed hands.

Everything was draped in thick curtains of fake cobwebs that were sprinkled with real cobwebs that built up on them. There were doors too, but they were likely props that didn't go anywhere.

After another corner, they came out into the large room that held the loading station for the ride.

The loading station sat at the bottom of a regal red carpeted staircase that led up to large windows that stared out into a turquoise tinted foggy, rainy night. The picture depicted through them was a little low resolution, but from a distance one could've taken it as just being a misty window.

At the foot of the stairs was a line of coaster carts ready to go. They were shaped somewhat bat-like, with yellow eyes on the front and the sides shaped like wings. It looked like they hadn't moved in a long time. The whole room looked untouched, with real cobwebs seamlessly weaving with the fake ones.

Ed continued looking around while Rambley got everything set up. Unfocused, fiddling around with the controls from inside the systems. He took a few pictures of the stairs before walking over and leaning out to try and get a look down the shaft that the track led into.

It looked like a light had gone off and left the whole tunnel in complete darkness. He shined his flashlight down and it saw nothing but an empty tunnel.

A loud buzz caused him to jump and almost drop his flashlight.

“The creatures of the night are calling you, Eddie,” Rambley said ghoulishly.

“They ought to warn a guy first.”

Rambley cackled menacingly.

The cart in front pulled up so they could board in. A staticky howl filling the air as the safety bar slid into place, latching them in.

“Please let this work...” Rambley mumbled under his breath.

“What?”

“Oh, nothing!”

It was no big deal!

...Just all this about how much this ride meant to Ed put a little bit of pressure on Rambley to make sure it worked. After all, this was a staple of his childhood experience! This was the one ride that HAD to work, and Rambley wasn't entire sure that it would. The track record wasn't great.

Needless to say, Rambley was already sweating bullets even before the ride started moving. Watching like a hawk for any hiccups in the

attraction- like that light which was definitely not supposed to be off.

He stole a glance at Ed. Ed looked pretty excited, already smiling, so Rambley relaxed a little bit. It was okay. So far so good.

The cart crept through the pitch-dark passage as the boom of thunder and the chirp of numerous bats played from around them. There was a light at the end of the tunnel though, and piano music began to slowly fade in as they rolled into a conservatory.

The room was half-octagonal in shape with a big window in the back framed by dusty drapes. The window didn't look outside but instead lit up a split second before the thunder ambience would boom. The only furniture in the room was a large piano in the center, though there were two large pots with fake plants against each wall.

Sitting at the piano- or more accurately, built into the piano- was an animatronic character. He looked like a bat with dark grey fur, large eyes with pink irises, a

noticeable snout, and large ears. He had white gloves and a white long-sleeved dress shirt with a purple vest. He wore a high collared cape that was purple on the outside and red and on the inside. Like a vampire's cape.

His pants were black, and his legs looked less like actual legs and more like props. If Ed was to guess, he was probably built directly into the bench and the legs were attached afterwards. He snapped a picture before Rambley swatted his arm down.

There was a chittering and squeaking noise from the speaker. The vampire bat- which looked more like a fruit bat than an actual vampire bat- lifted his arms and the piano music stopped.

“The creatures of the night! Vat beautiful music they make! Ah, velcome! Velcome to our home. I am Count Battamir Battum, and zis is our haunted castle! Explore if you vish, but be careful! Who knows vat may lurk in these walls...”

He chuckled and lowered his hands, and piano music began to play once more as the cart rolled out of the room and up a trick lined stairwell.

It was dark, with only flashes of lightning and dimly flickering candelabras lighting their way.

Ed was beaming all the while. It was just like he remembered, though he was cheating a little. He had seen videos of the ride before he came to visit Indigo Park so his memory was a lot fresher than it should've been. He looked at Rambley and noticed he had a weirdly intense look on his face.

That didn't bode well.

Though before he could ask, a light flickered on above them and they rolled from the stairs into another room.

This one was stylized like an old antique kitchen. Sort of like something out of the fifties, but with everything in darker colors. With a rounded bronze fridge and coppery stove, and a dining room table

topped with a black and white spiderweb print tablecloth and a golden candelabra. Not to mention the familiar curtains of cobwebs.

There were two animatronics in this room. One was a cow head sticking out of the wall- or sticking through a window. It wasn't a stylized character or anything, just a toonish cow with a band aid on its neck.

The other was another bat character. This one dressed like a housewife with a dark red dress and a black apron with a high collar. She also had curly black hair and red lipstick. Though considering that she was holding a milk bottle and glass both painted to look like they were full of red liquid, that might've not been lipstick.

“Well hey there, Sugar! I'm Batherine O'Battum, the matron of the family. Would you like a glass of warm blood? It's fresh from the cow!” she said, raising the arm with the glass.

The cow in the window mooed.

Rambley smiled again.

“Watch your step on the landing and watch out for the little ones! They get mighty mischievous when they’re hungry!” Batherine called as they wheeled out.

The cart rolled up the staired slope further until they stopped at the mouth of a dark hallway. Suddenly the flickering lights came on, revealing two small bat children standing at the end of the hallway on the ceiling.

“Come play with us. Come play with us,” they chanted. “Let’s play... hide and seek!” They giggled as the lights went out and the cart continued along.

The sound of a crackling fire faded in as the cart pulled into a fancy bedroom. A large dust-covered pink bed with regal curtains was off to the right and a flickering fireplace was off to the left. Straight in front of them was a balcony with another bat woman

perched on the railing. The balcony being a concave screen that showed the same rainy night as before.

The bat woman wore a flowing pink dress and a pink rose crown. Instead of moving her arms, as they were holding onto the railing, her legs were crossed with one leg bouncing in front of her.

“Oh, it’s such a beautiful night! Won’t you sing with us?” she asked.

She then began to sing. Not words but in rolling tones, with a voice like a princess more than a bat in a ghostly castle. Suddenly a bundle of bats on strings lowered from the ceiling around her.

“Hello, my friends! And hello to you too. I am Bathory, the songstress. Come sing with me again someday!” Her ears wiggled. As the cart rolled up, another line played, “Oh, and watch out for my brother! I think he’s up to something...”

The cart then passed through a hallway decorated like a library. Eyes could be seen glowing through

gaps between the books. There was giggling and tittering that sounded suspiciously like the twins, followed by the thumping of books. A few of them even slid and poked out of the bookshelves.

But at the end of the passage, they met with a roll of fog. It was a little heavier than it was supposed to be and smelled a little stale, but it got the feel across as they rolled into a circular room.

The cart went in a circle around the outside of the room, which was stylized like a mad scientist' lab. In the center of the room was a large metal table with a robot with a cow head laying out on it. Large globes stuck on tesla coils flickered and glowed with strands of light.

Above it stood a bat dressed like a mad scientist, with thick round goggles and a long white lab coat with grey elbow-length gloves. His arms stretched into the air.

"It tis alive!" the scientist shouted.

The globes crackled and alit, thunder boomed, and he laughed wickedly as the robot cow lifted its head and mooed. Then lowered his head enough to ‘notice’ the passing cart.

“Oh, hello. I was, umm... Fixing ze toaster!”

The discreetly hidden toaster on the side table suddenly popped.

“I am ze great scientist Battholemew Battum! And with my scientific breakthrough ve shall never go hungry again!” he exclaimed. Though as they wheeled out of the room, he could be heard adding on, “Hmm, but how do robot cows make blood...?”

“That part always gets me,” Rambley whispered.
“Looks like we’re coming up on the drop!”

“Looks like. You can hold onto my arm if you get scared.”

“Scared? Of one of my own rides? I don’t think so!”
Rambley said. Though he hooked his arm around

Ed's. "But I might take you up on that offer. Just in case."

Now they were going up the final stretch of stairs into the attic. Paintings on the wall flickered with lightning and changed soft human faces into scowling bats ones each time they did.

"Come to think of it, I really should've sent a cart through the ride to make sure everything was working right before we rode it..." Rambley mused.

Ed's head snapped to him. Oh God, what did that mean?

"Oh well! I suppose it's too late for that now. But try to hold on just in case," Rambley said with an apologetic smile.

Ed grabbed the bars in a white-knuckle grip.

Finally, they came to the top of the climb into an attic filled with old furniture covered in white sheets. A layer of little bats hung from the ceiling with their

eyes glowing red. Large windows sat before the cart and showed the rainy night, flickering with the lightning, and between them stood two familiar little bats.

“Look out below...” they said.

Ed’s grip tightened as they teetered on the edge. Rambley’s sheepish smile grew tighter as his fingers dug into Ed’s arm, the other gripping the safety bar tightly.

And then the cart tipped over and suddenly they were falling in a rapid spiral. The cart zipping down the loop while sounds and flashes went off around them. Ed whooped as he rode the rush with a big grin on his face while Rambley was dead silent with a ‘this is the end’ look etched on his face.

They were going faster and faster, and for a second it really felt like it would derail and send them crashing into the ground.

But then a moment later the spiral finished and the track pulled up into a couple of sudden bumps before slowing back to its speed before the drop. Then continued rolling into the next room.

“Hey, it still works!” Ed shouted.

Rambley gave a shaken little chuckle. “Y-Yeah.”

Now he saw what all the hubbub was about. But now he was even more confused about why anyone would ride it a second time.

The final room was a large dining room. All the Battum family members were seated around the table, along with the robot cow and even the cow head poking in yet another window.

“Ah, you made it to the feast! And you survived Batticus and Baturday’s devious plot as well. For that, you are honorary Battums,” Count Battamir greeted. He lifted a glass of dark red liquid in cheers. “A toast to our guests! Welcome to the family!”

“Welcome, Hun!” called Batherine.

“Oh, indeed!” added Bathory

“Electrifying!” chimed in Battholemew.

“You got lucky this time...” the twins said with a wicked shared giggles.

There was another crackle of thunder and raucous laughter that faded into chirps and squeaks as the cart left the dining hall and went down one last quick slope and into the docking station. With that, the ride came to a gentle stop inside of another much less decorated mansion room.

And then the ride was over, but Ed was still buzzing.

The whole thing had been the ultimate blast to the past for him. The thrill of revisiting the park that he had been looking for when he came back initially-sure, there was the mystery of it all, but there was also a part of him that just really wanted to relive his time here, and that ride did it.

“Looks like it works to me,” he said.

Rambley all but exploded.

“IT WORKED!!!” he suddenly hollered, causing Ed to jump. “It worked! IT WORKED! Did you see it?! It was perfect! All of the animatronics? Perfect! No stalls, no freezes, no glitches, no nothing but the ride functioning exactly like it’s supposed to! Maybe a little water damage, but that adds atmosphere! I can’t believe this, we have a fully functional ride still totally in order!”

Rambley rubbed his hands together excitedly before bolting out of the cart.

“Come on! Let’s go check the gift shop!”

Ed didn’t argue and hurried to catch up.

To neither’s surprise at this point, the Battum’s Family Heirloom Shop- the Haunted Castle’s gift shop- was largely intact. There were all sorts of

things lining the displays. Dolls of Bathory, cow robots, little figurines of the twins, bobbleheads, playsets, puzzles, anything they could sell and everything with the bat family's faces on them.

Ed was looking through a rack of clothing and costumes when he found a set of "Battum" vampire accessories. Basically, a cape and some fake ears stuck to a hanger with plastic. He grinned and held them up to show Rambley.

"Hey, take a look at-," Ed started.

He cut off as he turned around and caught a nearby screen clicking off. It had been blacked out when they came in, but he swore for a second it was lit up. Though he couldn't see what, if anything was on it.

"Find something good?" Rambley asked. He picked up a box containing a light-up haunted house. "That makes two of us! This would look perfect in my train set."

"Was that screen on?"

“Huh?”

Ed pointed to the screen and Rambley looked back at it.

“It didn’t look like it when we came in. Why?”

“I could’ve sworn it was just on,” Ed said.

Rambley looked over at the screen before narrowing his eyes, then unfocusing and checking for himself. Though after a few moments he focused and shrugged.

“It looks normal to me. It could be a glitch. Maybe an automated recording tried to play once we came in and it just didn’t activate correctly,” Rambley suggested.

That seemed reasonable enough, especially seeing as Rambley checked.

“Whatcha got there?” he asked.

Ed held the cape up. "Vampire costume."

"Really? Bring it here!"

Ed brought it over, eyeing the screen as he went. Rambley took the cape in his hand and looked it over.

"That's a pretty neat find, Eddie! Gosh, it looks just like the one I have on my Halloween model!"

Rambley said. Ed's reason for grabbing the costume going straight over his head. "Think you could fit both in your backpack?"

"Sure. Want me to buy them for you?"

"Aww, thanks, Buddy! But you don't have to. Since it's not leaving the park, I think I can borrow 'em for a while without them getting missed. At least the little castle. It's a shame to leave it here when it could be lighting up my basement," Rambley said.

“Good point,” Ed said. He pulled off his pack and opened it up for Rambley to carefully pack the stuff inside. Then he returned it to his back, turned-

And almost walked into a black screen hanging directly behind his head.

“Whoa!” He staggered back.

“Huh?! Oh! Heh, snuck up on you, didn’t it?”
Rambley snickered.

“Yeah, I guess it did...” Ed said uneasily. “Did you move it...?”

“Wha? No way! I’m all for spooks, but you could’ve hit your head on that,” Rambley said. Then squinted his eyes. “Though now that you mention it, was it there?”

Rambley hummed and his eyes unfocused.

“Because now that I’m thinking about it, I don’t think it was...” he said suspiciously.

Yet when he connected into the system, he found nothing amiss. No other active administrators, no other running programs except one default AI that was labelled for the ride. It was just them. Who else could it be?

Probably Salem again.

In fact, he really hoped it was Salem.

“...You know what? I know I promised you a tour of the Haunted Castle off-ride, but I think it’s time to get moving. Especially if we plan on reaching the labs before nightfall,” he suggested.

Despite his nonchalant tone, Ed took that suggestion as a sign and agreed without a second thought. Something about the gift shop was giving him weird vibes, like they were being watched. But the only thing watching them was the camera in the corner.

So, they high tailed it out of there. Heading out the back exit of the castle that led to a covered decking path leading around the side and out front.

“So, how do we get through? I don’t see another exit,” Ed asked.

“It’s less an exit and more of a back door. We’re heading that way!” Rambley proclaimed, pointing towards Mineshaft Drop.

The two headed to the warehouse-like building and into the front of the attraction. Unlike the Haunted Castle, which was a much more thematic dark ride, the Drop was an indoor coaster through and through.

Ed couldn’t remember ever riding it, but he had seen videos of it. But because the ride was largely pitch black with only little glimpses of lamps, signs, and spooky lights, it was hard to make heads or tails of what the ride was like. Save that it seemed to move fast and have a lot of turns.

The entrance looked like the outside of a mineshaft, save that it was indoors. There were shovels and pickaxes hung up on the wall, a large barrel filled with fake dynamite, and even a Rambley cut-out that had a real hard hat hung on it as a prop. The floor was stoney and the walls looked like, well, the walls of a warehouse.

The coaster carts were connected together and only had one seat per car, and they were stylized with a wood pattern to make them almost resemble mine carts. The safety bar was a lot thicker and looked much more secure.

But Rambley didn't spare a second look at the cart. He let Ed get a good look around before beckoning him to follow and leading him to the tracks, where he hopped down onto the maintenance walkway beside it and began to head through the tunnel the track led into.

Ed hopped down behind him and clicked on his light, to which Rambley quickly spun around and waved his hands.

“No, no! Turn that off. It’s really important you don’t turn your flashlight on.”

“Why? What’s in there?” Ed asked.

Rambley got a toothy smile. “It’s a surprise.”

Ed wasn’t sure how much he appreciated surprises in the park, but it seemed like Rambley was sure, so he clicked the light off and followed. Their footsteps echoing through the short tunnel.

It was too dark to see anything once they stepped into the larger room, but Ed could tell they had both from the echo and the general feel.

“Okay, hang on just a second...” Rambley said.

There was a long moment of silence before there came a hum from somewhere. Then a click as a set of overhead lights came on, then another, and another, stretching across the length of the warehouse.

Before them was the coaster itself now alit by the lights, and it was a sight to see. The tracks were looped, weaved, and laced tightly together in dips, turns, and twists. It was incredible- so much of it confined into such a small space. Now Ed knew why it seemed so jerky and fast in the videos, because it was, and it was probably an incredibly disorienting experience when in the dark.

Now he was almost disappointed that he didn't get to ride it.

"Well, what do you think?" Rambley asked.

"This is insane!"

"I know, right?! You think from the outside that it's going to be this tiny little rinky-dink ride, and it turns out it's probably the most intricate build in the whole park!" Rambley bragged. He waved Ed along again as he led him to some metal stairs leading down to the ground floor. "As a matter of fact, if you laid 'em track to track and had them at the same speed, and

didn't include the character introductions, this ride would be over twice the length of the Haunted Castle's! And in almost half the square footage."

"It must be one hell of a ride."

"I can't say from experience, but I think the track speak for itself."

"I think it says something about how Indigo Park isn't liable for whiplash."

"Very funny, but I'll have you know that all of our rides are up to date with the latest safety regulations!... From eight years ago," Rambley quietly added under his breath. He glanced up to see Ed grinning and simply rolled his eyes playfully before directing his attention ahead. "And there's the back door!"

Located beside one of the sharper curves of the track was an automated garage door. There was a keypad and a Critter Cuff scanner beside it.

“This shortcut will lead us right out of Haunted Hollow. All you need to do is scan your Critter Cuff and type in the code nine-zero-eight-two to get it open!”

“Can do,” Ed agreed, stepping up to do so.

“Great! See, this is one of those times where I need a little human staff intervention to get through. This is considered a security door, so I’m locked out, but a Rookie Rangler has high enough clearance to get through. And oh boy, once we get to the labs and get you on the books as a ROYAL Rangler? Let’s just say that’s going to open a lot of doors,” Rambley explained. “Well, what are you waiting for? Open her up!”

Ed scanned his Critter Cuff, which made an accepting beep and then typed in the code, which Rambley again recited out. With another affirmative beep, there was a creaking, and the garage door began to slowly lift.

But that was when the lights started to surge. Ed looked up at the bulbs and watched as they faded in and out. Rambley's ears twitched as he detected something else.

“Hang on. That doesn't sound right...”

And then the lights went out and the two found themselves in complete darkness. The warehouse fell into complete darkness.

Thankfully, Ed was still carrying his flashlight even though he hadn't turned it on. So, with a quick click of the button, they had light again. He spun around and shined it across the room, expecting something to leap out from the shadows and attack. But there was nothing there. Though the way the tracks got in the way of the light didn't help ease his concerns.

Rambley relaxed significantly once the light was on, and he snapped his fingers.

“Rats! Looks like that tripped the breaker!” Rambley said. He sighed dejectedly. “Let’s go find the breaker box.”

“Do you think it’s going to work? What if it shut off the generator?”

“I’m sure it didn’t. Not with how those lights were surging. I probably just need to flip a couple of switches... then flip them again if we plan on actually getting the door opened,” he muttered. He started walking back the way they came. “This way! I have a hunch it’s going to be on or near that wall over there.”

They climbed the steps again and Rambley began to squint in the darkness and scan the wall. Ed shined his light to help him, but in the process noticed a dull light coming from nearby.

“Where’s that light coming from...?” Ed mumbled to himself.

“Hmm? Oh, it’s probably coming from outside,”
Rambley dismissed. He held out his hand. “Light.”

Ed handed over the flashlight with an ‘mm-hm’ and
Rambley began to search with it. Ed took a few
steps to the side to look down the tunnel back
towards the entrance and saw the source of the
light.

He hadn’t noticed it coming in, but there was a small
fake miner’s lamp attached to the front of the
coaster. It was a low light, just enough to give the
impression it was there but not bright enough to spoil
the ride.

Huh. Pretty neat!... Wait.

“Wait a second, it’s a light on the coaster. How is that
still on?”

“It is? That’s odd. The coaster must be on a different
circuit,” Rambley mused. Then he perked up and
pointed. “There it is! That must be the box up there!”

He pointed to a box mounted up high on the wall, accessible by a slender walkway. Rambley walked over to a nearby ladder and, holding the flashlight between his teeth, began to climb up. It creaked, rattled, and wobbled under his weight.

He pulled the flashlight out of his mouth. “Whoa. Loose ladder. Better make a note of that!”

“Need some help?” Ed offered.

“No thanks, I’ve got it covered. I know you wouldn’t believe it with my poor showing with the generator, but I’m actually something of an electrician. Or at least an amateur one. Leave this to me!” Rambley said, poking a thumb to his chest. Then he put the flashlight back in his mouth and easily scaled the ladder.

Now on the walkway, he walked to the breaker box. He noticed it too was a little unsteady but still much more secure than the ladder. He pulled open the box and began to poke around inside.

Ed was left in mostly darkness, but it didn't bother him.

Not until he heard something. It was a faint clatter or clacking noise that came somewhere from the ceiling. Ed snapped his head in the direction but as expected, he couldn't see anything but darkness.

It could've just been a lingering crackle of the lights, but he didn't trust it. He strained his ears, catching another scuffling noise. His eyes widened and locked on the spot in the darkness. Something was there.

“And this should be... it!”

Rambley flipped a final switch and suddenly the lights came back on. Suddenly Ed saw exactly what the noise was coming from.

Nothing. Just a section of ceiling. Maybe? It was far enough away that it could've been the tracks, or the hanging lights, but that was all that was here.

Maybe Rambley's fiddling had echoed across the room? Ed wasn't sure but seeing as there was nothing there, he could've believed it.

"Okay, so! Now we've got to figure out the plan," Rambley said. He came over to the top of the ladder, clicking off the flashlight. "I'm thinking we miiight need to consider sneaking around back and trying to hop the fence."

"I'm down."

"Or maybe up and over," Rambley said with a cheeky smile. He was cut off by a clank and a mechanical noise. "What the-?!"

Rambley spun around and looked across the warehouse, and his eyes landed on the back door continuing to slowly rise. Inch by inch of it lifting off the ground. Then the lights started surging again.

Before either could say a thing, the breaker flipped a second time and they were left standing in the darkness.

“Well, that’s just wonderful,” Rambley muttered. He sighed and clicked on the flashlight before returning to the box. “Apparently the last command carries over. I might have to hook in and shut that off myself, if it’ll let me.”

“I guess we need the door open anyways...” Ed said.

“Good point! I’ll get it on again and we’ll see if it’s lifted enough to squeeze under.”

Once again, Rambley worked to get it back on. Once again, Ed thought he heard something off in the room. And once again, when the lights came back on, he saw nothing.

Just twisting tracks, buzzing lights, and-

Something dark.

It was only for a split second, but his eyes caught something moving. He stared at the section of track

it disappeared behind, but whatever it was didn't come out. But he knew he hadn't imagined it.

"Rambley, there's something over there," he warned.

"What? Where?"

Rambley turned back to look and instantly noticed the faint smell of something. He couldn't put his finger on what except that it was musty. He strained to listen but any chance of catching faint noises was thwarted when the back door mechanism kicked on again.

But it was that noise that disturbed whatever the thing was.

He saw something dark and furry move.

In fact, he saw about five 'dark and furry' things move. An edge of one here, a hair of one there, scattered around the tracks.

He got a look of dread as his heart dropped.

“Eddie. Get up here.”

The power died, throwing the entire warehouse into pitch darkness.

“Eddie, climb up here. Quick.”

Eddie didn't need to be told twice. He grabbed the ladder in the dark and started to step up.

And with a loud crack, landed back on his feet as the ladder came off in his hands, him just managing to catch it.

“...Please tell me that wasn't the ladder.”

Ed's silence spoke volumes.

The ladder was partially suspended so it didn't reach the ledge now, and it started to slide the second he put it on the warehouse wall due to texturing and its lack of appropriate footing.

“No good,” Ed said. Now holding the ladder between him and whatever those things were.

“Oh... C-Can you parkour your way up here?”

“Uh...” In the dark? Up a sheer wall? “Probably not. No.”

Something shifted and Rambley snapped the flashlight over in time to catch a tuft of dark fur slinking out of view.

And Rambley promptly darted to the edge of the walkway over Ed.

“New plan, catch this!”

Ed looked up in time to catch the flashlight dropped to him.

“Keep an eye out! I’ll get the lights on!”

Ed didn’t need to be told twice. He could hear skittering and shuffling and tried to locate the source,

catching more glimpses of movement. It was like they were avoiding the direct light, whatever they were.

Though he had a hunch.

“I think they’re bats,” Ed whispered.

Something swooped over his head, and he whipped the light up only to miss it.

He flailed his flashlight around, snapping it back and forth from around him to around Rambley and holding it steady on anything that moved until it disappeared behind the tracks. Though it was easier said than done. These things seemed to be moving closer every moment, creeping around the tracks where he couldn’t reach.

It dawned on Ed that what he had heard earlier had been them getting closer and closer, and just hiding before the light could come on.

Meanwhile, Rambley was trying to focus on the task at hand when he heard a thump and rattle from behind. Something landed on the railing.

He gulped and fumbled with the switches, so close to getting the lights on and struggling in the last leg. He heard clicking edging closer as something brushed his tail. He quickly yanked it forward and flipped the last switch.

Rambley looked over his shoulder just in time to see what was creeping up on him.

Beady black eyes. A scrunched up wrinkled face. Not as big as he was expecting, smaller than him. Lanky, patchy fur, large fleshy ears- one with a noticeable chip in it.

Well, what do you know? Turns out they were bats. They just weren't any kind of bats he'd ever seen.

It reacted instantly to the return of the light by floundering on the railing. Its mouth opening to reveal two sharp front teeth glossed in saliva as it

began to click, click, click in a way that instantly burned Rambley's ears before dropping off the railing and out of view.

From Ed's resulting, "WHOA!" he must've seen it too.

Rambley rushed to the railing and looked over, spotted multiple dark dots, and then looked over towards the back door.

It was halfway open! That was all they needed; they could run out the back!

Then the door mechanism kicked on and Rambley winced. If they could make it back there. Maybe the bats weren't aggressive? He didn't want to take that risk.

"Is the door open?" Ed called up, apparently getting the same idea.

"It's open, but... Hold on! Sit right there and get ready to run."

“What are we doing?”

“You’re going to keep those things off me and I’m going to get the lights on one more time, and then we’re going to run like the wind!”

“Like a bat out of hell, got it!”

Normally Rambley would appreciate the wordplay, but in this case not so much.

He turned back to the breaker box and ran over the steps one more time in his head. He just had to be quick, as fast as he could, and that would buy them enough time to run for it.

The lights went off once again and he went to work. But he wasn’t the only one.

Suddenly there were a lot more shadows moving in the dark. Perhaps emboldened by one managing to get onto the walkway.

Ed tried to shine through and around the walkway to keep them off, but there were too many. And they were all going straight for Rambley.

Rambley was frantically flicking switches when something suddenly dropped onto him. Something that felt like a cross between a coarse rug and a leathery purse.

“GAH! Get off! Get off!” he yelled.

It tried to nip his shoulder, and he swung and clocked it right in the face. It leapt off, but there were more closing in. As he frantically flipped the switches, he could feel them moving in all around him. And then...

The lights clicked on again. In an instant the steadily growing swarm started to flinch and recoil.

Rambley shoved past them and leapt off the walkway and onto the closest section of track. He began to easily scale the gentle slope in the

direction of the back door. He turned his head and saw Ed running for the stairs-

And then the room went dark. The door mechanism hadn't kicked on, the lights hadn't flickered, they hadn't had a chance. Whether it be a blown fuse or a safety precaution, the lights were back out.

Rambley felt like he was going to be sick, and Ed sounded like he had just stumbled his way down the stairs.

And the bats were right above him.

"Ed, run for it! I'll lead them off!" Rambley cried.

"Wait, no! Rambley!" Ed called after him.

But Rambley was already on the move. He got his flashlight on him for a second before his view was blocked by the fuzzy body of a bat. Then he caught a glimpse of his tail as he threw himself from one track to another, and the amount of shadows swooping in the residual glow of the flashlight.

Ed shined his light up and caught sight of a bat squeezing through a gap in the ceiling and then dropping to avoid the light. So, that's where they came in and, much to Ed's horror, that was exactly where Rambley was heading if he continued climbing.

"Rambley! Rambley, they're in the ceiling! You've got to come back down!" Ed shouted.

Rambley was too busy escaping to respond, but he did hear him. Not that he could change anything now.

He was going to get trapped up there and either dropped upon or dragged into the ceiling! Ed had to get up there, and he started to climb the track but realized quickly that he had no chance of catching up, and if he did he was probably going to get himself swarmed too.

Wait a second- the coaster! Ed looked back and, sure enough, the dull light of the coaster was on.

The coaster! He could run it through and run these things over, or at least scare them off. Hopefully not hit Rambley.

Maybe- and this was a rather stupid idea, he knew- he could get Rambley to jump into the coaster as it drove by. But what if Rambley just fell off? Well, what if he was there to catch him? What if he pulled him in quickly before he could get hit by anything.

It wasn't a foolproof plan. It was a downright foolhardy plan, but with all those things out there and Rambley trapped higher and higher up, they were out of options.

"Rambley, turn the roller coaster on!"

"What?!" Rambley called back. Then quickly dove aside with a shout, finding himself dangling under the tracks to avoid a bat.

"If you can, do it!"

That was an insane thing to ask. It violated so many safety precautions- especially since Rambley was the one currently on the track. But it sounded like Ed had a plan, and he trusted him.

As Rambley climbed up the underside of the track he unfocused- he couldn't see that well anyways- and just managed to activate the coaster before climbing on top of the track and making a break for it, trying to reach the walkway on the opposite wall.

One of them landed on top of him and sunk its teeth into his fur. Luckily, it was the fur of his tail, and it was too poofy to reach his actual skin underneath. He crawled out from underneath it and continued to frantically dart around on the tracks like a rat scurrying away from a cat. He could even feel the claws batting in the darkness.

Meanwhile, Ed ran through the tunnel and jumped into the first coaster car as it started to roll out, having to squeeze his way under the already lowered safety bar. He managed to just get himself

inside as the coaster made it out into the pitch-dark warehouse.

Since the power was out except for the coaster, there was no spectacle. No lights, no ambience, just darkness and sharp clicking noises that had to be from the bats. Ed held his flashlight up, but he knew once he started picking up speed he wouldn't have a chance to focus on anything. He could only keep his head down.

The noise of the rattly coaster caught the attention of the bats immediately.

Rambley was now perched on the other walkway, crouched down with his arms over his head and his tail wrapped around him. Trying desperately to huddle and hide- which he knew had a slim chance of working.

The bats not only knew where he was, but he realized now that they were targeting him specifically. He couldn't understand why. Trained to

not attack guests? Maybe. Smelled his fear? Also maybe. But something still didn't make sense.

From their faces- the nose, the facial grooves- they had to be Vampire Bats. But Vampire Bats weren't like this! They weren't aggressive blood suckers, they were timid creatures that were usually a whole lot smaller than this!

Unless they were starving. Surely that extra size didn't help matters either.

Rambley could hear more closing in and was preparing himself to make a last-ditch leap back onto the tracks to escape.

But then the coaster rolled into the warehouse and suddenly the bats were much more drawn to that noise than him. Seeing them distracted, he started to slowly crawl along the walkway when Ed yelled out.

“RAMBLEY! WHEN I COME BY, JUMP ON!” His voice was somewhat distorted as he whipped around the first corner.

Wait, Ed was on the ride?! That was the plan?!
Rambley hadn't even gotten a chance to run the
carts through once, why would- wait, did he say
jump on?

“ARE YOU CRAZY?!?!” Rambley shouted back. He
then promptly covered his mouth when he noticed
some of the distracted bats tilting their heads back
and forth and listening for him.

Thankfully the resulting squeal from the coaster's
brakes caught the attention of most of them, though
Rambley caught sight of one crawling on the ceiling
towards him. It stopped when he looked at it,
waiting.

Oh right. Bats weren't actually blind. And this one
was clearly waiting for him to let his guard down.

He started to crawl backwards in the direction of the
ladder only to hear some clinking and clanking on it
and looking back in time to see another bat crawling

up onto the walkway. It was the one with a chip in its ear.

There was no getting down that way, and he couldn't run out on the track with a coaster about to whip by.

The only option was the one Rambley knew was the riskiest. Jump too soon, get run over. Jump too late, loose his grip, plummet, break leg and or hit his head, and then get swarmed upon by hungry bats.

He only had one shot. Rambley grit his teeth and braced himself. He quickly calculated the speed of the coaster, of himself, of the loops, of how long he had, when he had to jump-

And then he jumped.

And by some miracle landed right on top of Ed.

Ed shouted and almost shoved him off before patting him down.

"IT'S ME! IT'S ME!" Rambley cried.

“RAMBLEY?!”

“YES!”

Ed hooked an arm around his neck and pulled him tightly against him. “WATCH YOUR HEAD!”

They whipped down a short dip under another track a few seconds later. Ed hadn't even seen it coming, he just remembered the state of the track with the lights on and knew it would eventually.

Just like the ride would eventually end. Eventually it would slow down to roll through the other tunnel and dock itself, and when that happened surely the bats would just swarm them.

They had to figure out a plan. While Ed focused on keeping Rambley from flying off the cart while trying to spot bats, Rambley was unfocused and focused on finding a way out.

And those track schematics gave him an idea. He focused and looked over, noticing light and chased it with his head until he got a good enough glimpse to recognize it as the back door, which had gotten almost three quarters of the way open. It was open!

And there was a curve of track right beside it that they hadn't reached yet!

Well, it wouldn't be the first time he had to make a dangerous jump today- and it worked out the last time.

“WE'RE COMING UP TO THE BACK DOOR! I'M GOING TO TIGHTEN THE BREAKS AND WHEN IT SLOWS, WE'LL JUMP OUT!”

“WHAT?!”

“WE'RE GOING ON THREE!... TWO!... ONE!... NOW!”

With that, Rambley activated the emergency brakes. There was a grinding noise as the cart started to rapidly slow down.

There was a loud pop from somewhere beneath the wheels and suddenly the cart was picking up speed again and went right off the tracks.

Held up only by speed and its own weight as it careened and skidded across the concrete floor with a deafening squeal right towards the back door.

Though Ed and Rambley didn't hear much over their own screaming.

The cart careened through and just barely made it through that doorway and out across the road, continuing to lose speed as it ground on the concrete, and then gliding into some scraggly hedges before hitting an iron fence and stopping with a jolt.

Ed's heart was pounding in his chest as he waited for something to start hurting to signal a serious

injury. He had to remind himself to breathe- well, once he got out from under Rambley who had him in a near headlock.

Rambley slowly loosened his hold and lifted his head, looking around in surprise to see that they had gotten out in one piece. Only to succeed in getting himself poked in the temple by a branch. He hissed as he pulled himself free of the pointy twigs and started pulling leaves out of his fur as Ed shakily climbed out of the cart.

“Oh wow. Th-That was close. I can’t believe we actually got through the door. Phew! Two inches- Maybe just like twelve inches to the side and we would’ve smashed into it and boy, that wouldn’t have been pretty,” Rambley prattled. His voice and hands shaking from adrenaline. “Buuut, heh, looks like we’ve got another ride that’s in working order! That’s something, right?”

Ed made a hand motion like he was going to say something, but he didn’t. He just stood there staring

at the derailed cart- the two behind it too, it must've detached from the others.

There was so much that could've gone wrong in the last thirty seconds that he could barely believe that he was standing up.

"You know, I think maybe we should get moving. Heh, it getting dark and all and with that being a bunch of BATS," Rambley said with a nervous smile.

Ed looked back towards the still opened warehouse door before nodding. He turned and started up the road in the direction he assumed led towards the sphere and labs. Rambley caught up to his side quickly.

"Funny. I never thought bats could be scary. I know they're supposed to be creepy, but I've always just saw them as- I don't know- flying Halloween mice. But those bats? I think I'll be seeing them in my nightmares from now on. Better than Barlow, I guess."

Ed nodded wordlessly.

“And in case you’re wondering, that was NOT the Battums Family. In fact, with how realistic they looked I wonder if they escaped an enclosure like those crabs we saw in Oceanic Odyssey. And then they set up shop in there because it was so dark. What do you think?”

“I don’t know,” Ed said briskly.

Rambley picked up that tone. His ears twitching at alert.

“Eddie?” He grew concerned and caught up with him. “Eddie, what’s wrong?”

“What’s wrong?!” Ed repeated in disbelief.

“Oh, uh. Good point, I know what’s wrong,” Rambley said sheepishly. He put on a smile. “Okay, so it was another close call. BUT we got out alright! And we’re mere steps away from the labs! It was almost worth it.”

“It’s not okay though. You’re not-!”

Ed wiped his hand down his face in exasperation before finally stopping and turning towards him. Rambley could see how upset he was from his expression alone and his ears reflexively tilted back, though that now-strained smile struggled to stay present.

“This is the problem, Rambley. This was a close call, but it wasn’t the only one. You keep- we keep going to places and you act like they’re going to be safe, and then we get attacked by mascots.”

“Yeeaah, that IS a problem. The mascots- Frankly, I don’t even think those guys were mascots, so go figure. Heh. But uh, but still, we got out of it okay! Maybe we were a little careless hanging out and riding the rides this close to dark, but we had a good time! Right?”

Normally Ed would've folded, but something about this time tipped Ed over the edge. He couldn't let it go. Not this time.

"The mascots aren't the problem. The problem is that you just- you won't tell me we're walking up on something dangerous. You keep pretending it's all hunky-dory, and then we almost get killed, or seriously hurt! And I just-." Ed caught himself and calmed himself with a slow exhale. "I thought you weren't going to keep anymore secrets from me."

"I'm not! You're acting like I knew there were a bunch of bats living in the mineshaft," Rambley said defensively.

"Maybe you didn't but then you should've just... not pretended like you knew it was safe?"

"I wasn't pretending! What, do you think I'm doing this on purpose?! That I'm secretly hiding all these freaks all over the place?! I don't want you getting hurt!" Rambley snapped. "And if I recall right, I was

the one they wanted to sink their teeth into,” he added, poking a thumb into his chest.

“I don’t think you’re doing it to hurt me. I think you’re doing it because you’re afraid I’m going to leave.”

In a split second Rambley’s growing frustration was cut short by shock. He stared at Ed before looking away. Ed noticed how his tail started to coil around him again protectively and softened his voice.

“Rambley, I’m not going to abandon you because the park is dangerous, but I’m sure not going to keep walking into traps because you won’t be honest with me. You’re my guide. I need you to prepare me when I’m walking into something like this. Like you did back at the theater? The first time I went in? I had my cuff, but you still warned me, and I was on guard that whole time... I mean, I saw Lloyd like, right when I walked in, but if I hadn’t I would’ve known... And I guess it’s my fault I’m not being more careful,” Ed quietly admitted. “Guess that one’s on me.”

Rambley ears and eyes drooped sadly as he rubbed his arm.

“...I’m sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing? You’re right...” Rambley mumbled. He sighed. “Okay, Eddie. You want me to be honest. And I’ll be honest. And honestly... honestly... I didn’t know Barlow was at the studios.”

“I know.”

“No, listen,” Rambley interjected.

Ed listened quietly.

“And I... I didn’t know all those bats were there. I didn’t even know Haunted Hollow had bats. I don’t KNOW these things, because the truth is that I know this park like the back of my hand, but... only the stuff they let me know. I don’t know how many mascots are in the park. I don’t know which places are safe and which aren’t. I don’t even know

anything about the labs...” Rambley fiddled his hands anxiously.

“I know I act like I’m the guy in charge, but the truth is that I was always just an extra set of eyes. The only reason I have any access at all is because I work my way in past where I am supposed to go. And when I said that we were going to discover all these mysteries together, I meant it. Because everything outside of my treehouse is news to me.”

“Then why didn’t you tell me?” Ed asked. There was a pause. “Rambley?”

“...Because I didn’t want you to know how much of a burden I really am,” Rambley said lowly.

“What are you talking about? You’re not a burden.”

“Yes, I am! You’ve been here, what, a month and you’ve already had to save me from Finley, save me from Salem, save me from bats, Barlow, hoodlums, all sorts of things! Not to mention the fact that I am monopolizing ALL of your time! You go home, you

stream, you come back here, and you're on Rambley-sitting duty because Rambley's still stuck in the past!" Rambley unloaded. "Rambley wants to go find his friends and fix the park, but Rambley can't even walk across the park without a Rangler escort!"

Was... Was that rhetorical or could Rambley actually not go anywhere without a Rangler with him?

Rambley looked away to silent stew within himself. His hands clenched at his sides, still half-hidden behind his tail.

Ed could tell that he had felt this way for a while.

"You're not a burden, Rambley, and you sure aren't my burden. I come here because I want to, because I want to see you," he assured. "I'm just... afraid that there's something big that you're not telling me."

"Well, that's the big thing. My face might be all over the park, but I'm no big shot. I'm just a big joke,"

Rambley said. He closed his eyes solemnly. "...I'm sorry, Eddie. I let you down."

"You didn't- No. Rambley, no. You didn't let me down."

Ed started to step in when Rambley raised a hand to stop him.

"I'm going to make it up to you," he swore.

"You don't have to make it up to me."

"Yes, I do. Because you are risking your life coming down here." Rambley crossed his chest with his other hand. "I promise, cross my heart and hope to die, that I won't hide anymore danger from you. If I start getting bad vibes, you're going to know about it. And if I don't know what I'm talking about it, then you're going to know. And maybe... maybe then you'll have a right to trust me."

"I do trust you."

“I know. But I don’t want you to trust me because you like me. I want you to trust me because I earned it,” Rambley said sincerely.

Not only did Ed believe him, but this time he didn’t feel like Rambley was placating him at all. He was being totally honest, and that finally got a smile back out of Ed. A tired, apologetic one, but a smile none the less.

Funny how a little smile could make Rambley go from feeling like a sack of dirt to a million bucks.

But they weren’t done here. He agreed to be honest, so he laid it all out for him.

“So, fully upfront about the labs. I don’t know what’s in there. And now seeing all these loose animals and mascots, I’m thinking there’s going to be some nasty stuff in there. I don’t know what they were doing in there, and I don’t even know if I’ll have any access once we get inside,” he explained. “This is your out, Ed. I can go in there on my own and you can wait

outside, and I won't be mad or anything. I'd rather risk my tail than your life."

"And I'd rather risk my life than sit outside waiting to see if you come back. So, thank you for being honest, but I'm going in with you," Ed said.

"Are you sure?"

"No, but I'm going to do it anyway."

Rambley cracked a smile again. "Why do I have a feeling you do that a lot?"

Ed chuckled a little. "Yeah..." He waved for him to come along. "Lead the way."

"Sure thing, Buddy!"

The two began to walk down the road. In the distance they could see the looming sphere on the horizon while Haunted Hollow fell behind.

They didn't look back- so they didn't see when the back door closed itself.

...

...

"Who called you a burden?"

Rambley was taken aback by the sudden question. He looked up at Ed before quickly looking away.

"I called me a burden, Eddie."

"You said it sort of like... someone's said it to you before," Ed said. He rubbed his neck- still tight from the ordeal on the cart. "You don't have to tell me. This isn't a trust thing, but... I was just wondering."

He trailed off. He would've left it there, Rambley knew that, but...

He had to prove himself. He couldn't keep keeping secrets.

“I was pretty high maintenance as far as mascots went. They didn’t have to train me to entertain the guests, but I needed a lot of attention...” Rambley admitted. “There were a lot of things I needed the workers to do for me. Bring me food, bring me water, clean my house, make sure I look the part... It was stuff I could’ve done myself, but I just didn’t want to mess it up, and... it gave them a reason to come in.”

He finally looked up at Ed again. “I don’t want to do that to you. You’re not my caretaker, you’re my friend!... My best friend, you know.”

“Oh, Buddy...”

Rambley put up his hands in defense. “It’s no big deal! Really, I know that it’s just-.”

Ed swooped in and pulled him into a hug. That shut him up quickly. He hugged back eagerly.

“...I needed that. Thank you,” Rambley said. “And thanks for not still being mad at me.”

“I wasn’t mad at you.”

“Then what were you?”

“...Passionate about us not getting killed by bats.”

Rambley laughed a little.

“You’re not a burden.”

Rambley’s eyes started to sting, and he held tighter.

“I love Indigo Park, and I want to see it come back, but the truth is if it was just the park I would’ve left weeks ago. I come back because of you.”

Rambley hid his face so he wouldn’t see him tearing up. He bit his lip and fought them back.

“You okay?”

“Y-Yeah. Better than okay. I’m feeling great,”
Rambley said. He discreetly wiped his eyes. “Never
been better.”

“Good. You being quiet made me a little nervous.”

Rambley snickered again and fully hugged him back
once more.

And he didn’t feel like a burden. Or a loser. Or a
sucker. Or anything else.

He just felt fine.

...

...

Rrrrr...

Rrrrr... Rrrrr... Rrrrr...

Rambley slapped a hand over his face but alas, the
soft rumbles didn’t stop.

Rrrrr... Rrrrr... Rrrrr...

“Sounds like someone’s getting hungry,” Ed joked.

“Alright, get off. Ya big softie.” Rambley pushed him off playfully. “It’s an autonomic reflex.”

“Yeah, okay.”

“I mean it! You can look it up,” he said, crossing his arms. “But wait until we get back to the house. We should probably keep an eye out for any loose bats just in case.”

Ed didn’t need to be told twice. He kept an eye on the steadily darkening sky as they continued towards the labs.

And tried his best to not think too hard about what Rambley told him about them. He’d see for himself soon enough. The road behind Haunted Hollow led a short way in between the attractions. It was surrounded by foliage and walls, blocked from the

main portion of the park. There was even a sloped path that branched off that led down into what looked like a parking garage or a bunker.

Rambley, the walking information kiosk he was, gladly explained without Ed having to ask.

“See that down there? That’s the entrance to the tunnel system! Indigo Park employees initially used those to speedily get around the park from underneath. They were strictly for Royal Rangler staff usage only. Well, them and most of the cleaning and maintenance staff. Turns out seeing someone wheeling a big trash can around sort of breaks the immersion,” he said.

“Neat. Have you ever been down there?”

“Nope! I’ve seen it through the cameras though and have the utility map on file right up here! Just in case we ever get lost,” Rambley said, poking his temple and winking. “Most of the cameras- Well, no. Pretty much all of the cameras have gone out down there.

At least all the ones that are close enough for me to access. So, I'm not sure how it looks now."

"Probably flooded," Ed said.

"Right, and that could be a problem. But we'll cross that swampy, stagnate ditch when we get there," Rambley said. "Speaking of which- here we go!"

He led Ed to a gate and unlatched it before pushing it open. It was a little rusty but gave with a firm shove of his shoulder, letting back out onto a proper park path. The other side of the gate was covered and wood and painted to look like a Rambley face mural, disguising that it was a gate at all.

It let out onto the road leading right up to the square that the massive sphere was mounted in the center of. The sphere was starting to fall apart. A few of the panels having fallen and shattered on the ground below.

"Think the Big World of Yesteryear's still running?"

Rambley looked at Ed with a beaming smile.

“You remember! I thought only the older folks appreciated that ride! What was your favorite part?”

“The western saloon one. Yours?”

“Ooo, that’s a good one! Same!” Rambley said. “Tell you what, how about we stop in on the way back? I don’t know if the ride’s up and running, but I know for a FACT that there aren’t any mascots, just mannequins and animatronics!”

Considering that the Mineshaft wasn’t supposed to have a colony of giant bats living in it-

“Sure.”

Eh. What harm could a bunch of life-sized dioramas do? Besides, it was good seeing Rambley so excited after his upset earlier.

But that wasn't their current destination. That would be the large square building that lay only a short way behind the sphere.

The building looked surprisingly ordinary all things considered. Cosmopolitan styled, simple lined square glass windows that were too reflective to see through. Counting the windows, it looked to be about seven stories tall- not counting if it had a basement.

Ed recognized the building, sort of, but couldn't remember ever paying attention to it. In a way, he was almost disappointed. It looked too normal for some sort of mysterious laboratory growing mascots inside.

There was another large building located behind this one that was a parking garage, and a secret back entrance road led from the main road all the way to it, so that workers could get there without crossing the entire park.

Ed already knew about that back road because he had planned on going down it when he first arrived

at Indigo Park, but it was locked up like Fort Knox. Not only was there an even bigger gate blocking it, along with plenty of signs warning about trespassing and surveillance, but it looked like it had been almost entirely overtaken by nature. Or at least, he saw at least one tree down.

The giant parking garage gave some credence to the fact that this building was being used for something. Unless that was just employee parking- in which case they could've probably used a little more. Maybe only the higher ups got the privilege of driving right up to work without crossing the park.

They walked up to the front of the building. There was a wall of windows lining each side of a set of automatic doors. These could be seen through and revealed a clean little lobby with only a singular Rambley cutout by the white front desk.

There were soft lavender tiles on the floor, white walls, and a big pair of shiny elevators. Along with what looked to be two doorways or exits at the back,

the wall between them had an Indigo Logo painted on it.

It looked like a fancy doctor's office. At least that much aligned with it being some sort of laboratory.

Rambley gestured to the door with a sweeping bow.

“And here we are! Welcome to Indigo Incorporated! Or, well, that's my name for it. The actual name is classified... Not to you! I don't know either, heh. Maybe we'll find that out while we're inside.”

He didn't know the name of the labs?... That didn't bode well, but it made sense considering what he said earlier.

Ed peered at the lobby through the glass.

“Not much to look at,” he said before thinking.

Rambley looked shocked. “Are you kidding? Look at this place! It's the most modern establishment in the park! What, were you expecting tesla coils and

radiology equipment? Well for your information, those are in the basement, along with the rest of the fun stuff,” he said, crossing his arms and shooting him a playful smile. “But first we’ve gotta get in there. Allow me!”

Rambley stepped up onto the rubber mat and when the door didn’t automatically open- he didn’t seem surprised when it didn’t- he unfocused to try and open it up from inside the system.

Normally it would only take him a few seconds to hook back on and have the park’s inner workings at his display. Even when he found himself denied access, he usually saw the skeleton of the system- and usually a pointed pop-up that he would require higher access. Which he was usually able to brute force around.

This time was different. This time there was nothing.

And not nothing as in the system was down. The system was up, but when Rambley hooked on he

couldn't see anything inside. It was like he was staring at a blank black abyss.

He tried to push in deeper and catch onto anything inside.

And felt something slide through his mind like a claw through his scalp, severing the connection.

“AH!” Rambley jumped back and grabbed his head with a hiss. “Ough...”

“Rambley?! Are you okay? What happened?”

“Ugh, I don't know...” His eyes focused as he rubbed at his temples. “I think there must be some sort of... security block on the door. Some sort of anti-hack measure or something. It felt like someone just jammed fork in the back of my head.”

“Ouch. Want to sit down?”

“Just for a second. Please.”

Rambley sat down on the step and continued to rub his head. Ed sat alongside him and patted his back, keeping a look out while keeping a careful eye on the raccoon. He really hoped it wasn't a delayed injury from the accident.

It was bad enough when Rambley caught the flu. If he had a secret brain bleed, he was done for.

But after a minute or two Rambley's headache lightened up and he dropped his hands onto his knees with a tired look.

"I don't think I can do that again... There has to be another way inside!" he said with determination.

"Maybe the parking garage around back?"

"I'd say that's a good place to check! And surely there are fire exits, or even an open window somewhere. And if not, we can always try the tunnels... But I really don't want to try the tunnels."

“Yeah, no thanks. With our luck they’ll be full of snakes or something.”

“Well, I can tell you one thing. And that’s that there are absolutely NO snakes in In... uh... Actually, I wouldn’t want to speak too soon,” Rambley said awkwardly.

On second thought, maybe Ed was starting to regret this agreement to have Rambley be as honest as possible, because that sentence could’ve definitely used some sugarcoating.

“Not to mention they’re either flooded, collapsed, or dark and dingey, and totally off-limits to anyone without a Royal Rangler cuff. Let’s just say they’re not ideal even as a last resort,” Rambley finished.

As tempted as Ed was to explore those tunnels, he had his fill of being chased tonight. So, instead, once Rambley was up on his feet they went around back.

There was a door hidden around the side beside a little courtyard. One with a little fountain and a few

cast iron benches for sitting. It was quaint, even though it had become a little overgrown. The door though was solid and wouldn't be strongman'd open.

So, they went around back and got into the parking garage. Oddly enough, there were some cars still parked inside. From the crud that had accumulated on them it was clear that they had been there since the park closed.

The fact that the cars had been seemingly abandoned didn't bode well. Ed took a picture, made a mental note, and kept going. Rambley noticed him doing it but didn't say anything, and didn't make eye contact.

They found both doors to a stairwell and an elevator. The elevator wouldn't respond and the doors inside were locked tight, which made it another dead end.

Finally, there was a possibility in the form of a vent opening. Rambley studied it with a hum before pointing at it. "Think you can jimmy that open?"

“Give me a second.”

And with a trusty quarter, Ed managed to unscrew three screws and brute force the last one, opening the shaft. Though it was a much tighter squeeze, and he knew he wouldn't fit.

“Give me a boost?” Rambley asked. Ed did, helping him into the vent. “I'll see if I can get out the other side and unlock the door for you.”

“Be careful. Oh, and take this.” Ed handed him the quarter. “For good luck.”

“I will treasure it,” Rambley said with a playful smile.

Then he crawled into the vent and Ed was alone. He leaned against the wall with his hands in his pockets, expecting a wait.

But it was less than a few minutes later when he heard scuffling and thumping. He watched the vent and shortly afterwards Rambley stuck his legs out and hopped down onto his feet.

“No good?”

“It was going very good until I reached the fan,”
Rambley said. He dusted himself off with a sigh.
“Back to the drawing board.”

And then they found themselves back at square one.

As they walked out of the parking garage, Rambley plopped down on the curb with his head resting on his fists and a furrowed, frustrated brow.

“Let’s face the facts, it’s locked up tighter than a canary cage in a house full of cats. There’s no way we’re getting in there without a keycard,” he mumbled.

Ed sat alongside him.

“Where do we get one? Can we get one?”

There was a pause. Then Rambley lifted his head in realization.

“I know where we can get one...” he said quietly. He turned to Ed. “Do you remember that canister of gas Salem threw at Lloyd? And the one they used to drug me? They got both of those from the labs, which means they’re getting inside.”

“Which means they have a keycard.”

“Bingo.” Rambley shot him a toothy grin. “And I’d bet my bandana that it’s in their house right now.”

In their house in Spoiled Swamp, guarded by someone carrying around a bunch of gas canisters.

...

It still beat crawling around down in the tunnels.

“But we’ll need a plan. Salem’s not going to let us walk in and take it.”

“Could we ask for it?” Rambley gave him a look. “I’m serious. What if we tell Salem we’re looking to bring

your friends back? I know they don't trust me, but they'd get behind that, right?"

"I don't know. I don't think so, and it's not worth the risk asking. Once they know we want it there's no chance of swiping it."

"Fair point. So, how do we do this?"

"We'd have to get Salem away from the swamp..."
Rambley tapped his fingers on his cheek. "We'll need a distraction."

"Doesn't seem that hard when you've got access to the loudspeakers."

"That's true, but would Salem buy it? It barely worked on Barlow and he's... well, Barlow." Rambley hummed and rubbed his chin. "Maybe if we get to Spoiled Swamp, I can start poking around and distract Salem, giving you a chance to sneak into their house and snatch their keycard! The tricky part will be convincing them you're not there. Once they see me alone, they're going to know something's up."

Unless we stage us getting separated. Doable! But complicated.”

“I think we need to go with the plan to get Salem away from the house.”

“Right.”

They thought for a second.

“...I’ve got an idea,” Ed said. “But it’s crazy.”

“Don’t talk me out of it before you told me it. Tell me!”
Rambley asked excitedly.

“The way we got Salem out of the swamp last time was a party.”

Rambley deflated a little. “Uh huh?”

“So, how about we “throw another party”?” Ed said, emphasizing with quotations.

“Wait, so you mean like pretend we’re throwing a party?”

“Kind of. Play some music, invite a couple of people over, and then one of us sneaks over there and gets the keycard.”

Rambley got a tense smile. “I like the whole thing except that part about inviting people over. That didn’t end so well last time, if you recall.”

“Two, three people tops.”

“Mmm, better. But still risky. If Salem found out, we could be in big trouble again...”

Ed understood his hesitation. He would’ve switched up the plan at that point if he hadn’t continued before he could.

“Did you have three people in mind...?”

“Laura. And maybe, uh... Daryl and Katie.”

Red-haired guy and workout girl.

“Wait, I remember them! They behaved themselves pretty well.” Rambley tapped his fingers together anxiously. “But Salem...”

“We’ll figure out a way to frame it as my idea. I’ll take the fall from Salem.”

“...You’re sure Laura will come?”

“Yup.”

“Well...”

Oh, this had the makings of a really bad idea, but Rambley was very tempted... But, uh, only to get into the labs! Of course, that was the goal. Not to just invite a bunch of Ed and Laura’s friends over and just... watch and pretend to be part of the friend group from his screens. Which would’ve only been weird if he wasn’t Rambley the Raccoon, who was supposed to be friends with everyone by design.

And it would guarantee a real convincing distraction. Salem would be furious, but at least they'd have to crawl out of their hole to come monitor the situation. That would give them a slim window, but it was better than nothing. And it would get them in the labs.

It wasn't a great plan, but it was the only plan with any chance of working. Even if it had a high risk of backfiring.

"We'll do it! But under one condition."

"Yeah?"

"Do you think afterwards you could stick around for a while? Just in case Salem tries something," Rambley asked sheepishly.

"Sure! I plan on it."

"Great! How about we do it the day after tomorrow? That gives you a chance to get home and get your stream done and gives the park a day to settle

down. I don't know how much Salem's watching, but they might catch on if they find out we came to the labs and immediately threw a bash... Or maybe not! Maybe they'll think it's a... early Thanksgiving shindig or something? Oh whatever, as long as they don't catch wise!"

His anxiousness was palpable.

Ed was less so, but he made a mental note then and there to not take his friends anywhere near any of the wild animals, Barlow included.

"Soo, what now?"

"Now," Rambley got up from his seat and brushed off his backside and fur. "We head on back home, eat some marshmallows, and watch some old cartoons! If you're up to it, that is. We'll save the Big World of Yesteryear for another time. Preferably a time before dark."

"Sounds like a plan!"

Ed got up and they started around the building.

It wasn't until they were out front and walking away that he caught Rambley looking back at the door with a disappointed look.

"Hey, we'll get in there," Ed assured.

"I know..." Rambley sighed before perking back up. "Hey, I have an idea. So that this trip wasn't entirely a bust, how about we go and see if we can get the Cross-Country Train Tram up and running? It looked like it's parked at this station."

"The what?"

"The tram that takes guests around the park! Don't tell me you've never ridden it before!" Rambley said with exaggerated shock, putting his hands on his cheeks.

"No, I have! I just didn't realize it had a name. Do you think it still works?"

“I sure hope so! It looked like the tracks that were leading between the studio and the hollow were in pretty good shape, and another thing we have in our favor is that the train tram runs on the main power supply. It'll probably be drinking up power from the generators already running! All we need to do is hop aboard and see how far we can get!”

“Beats walking all the way back, especially if we're getting chased by Barlow and bats. Alright, I'm in. Lead the way, Buddy.”

“No problem, Pal!” Rambley replied.

It wasn't far to the tram station thankfully, and it was it... partially alright conditions. The cutesy, violet clapboard roof of the boarding station had fallen in, but was flimsy enough that it didn't do any damage to the tram. It was more like a monorail than a true train, basically the carts without the engine. Boxy and with open windows.

Rambley got it on after about ten minutes of fiddling with the automated systems. He was determined to

get that tram working, despite the multitude of alerts and fail safes he had to push past to do so.

But finally, he got it activated and excitedly clamored inside, patting the seat beside him.

Ed started to climb inside only to hesitate. Flashing back to skidding across the road on a derailed coaster.

“It’s okay, Eddie. The wheels are locked to the tracks, the pathing systems are online, and there’s no dips or dives on this ride. AND there’s an emergency braking system! It’s as safe as can be—I’d bet my... life on it.”

Ed quirked a brow at that pause, and Rambley answered with a beaming smile. So, Ed gave a little shrug and got in.

The seats were a bit dirty and seemed a little spongey, maybe dry-rotted, but the exterior leather was holding up. Old, dried dirt pooled in the

floorboard where rainwater must've gotten in, but it wasn't wet now.

The tram started with a little Indigo Park jingle and without any hitches, and began to glide down the track. It was so smooth that it almost felt weightless. Twigs and leaves across the track crackled under the tires but didn't disrupt the drive.

Once the trees and hedges started to open up they could see more of the park. Rambley pointed out the window.

“See that over there? That's the way to the Pirate Bay. If you look really closely you might be able to spot the old lighthouse. And- oh- that stall! See it? That's the sample stall for the 'Round the World Restaurant- which you might remember has a meal from every country in the world! Well, the big countries at least. And there's the auGH!”

Rambley proceeded to get a mouthful of leaves and twigs as the train drove through an especially overgrown section. He sputtered and spat.

“And there’s the sticker bushes.”

Ed tried to cover his snort with a fake cough.
Rambley’s side-eye showed that he didn’t buy it.

He kept himself inside the window after that. Instead resting his arm on the window one they were on the open track leading between Haunted Hollow and the Studio.

The view of the sky opened too, and he looked up at a blanket of stars that had appeared since the sun went down.

“Take a look at those stars. Can’t get a view like this anywhere else!” Rambley said, propping his head up on his hand.

On the contrary, the stars were probably the most normal thing here. Looking one way, Ed saw the living embodiment of Indigo Park, as fluffy and cheerful as he looked on any brochure, and the

other he could see Barlow currently sprinting across the plaza in Haunted Hollow towards them.

...But they had a big gate between them, so he was just going to not say anything and hope it didn't come back to bite him later.

Truthfully, seeing Barlow again gave him this uneasy sour feeling in his stomach for a split second. It faded off once the dog was out of sight, but it made sure to remind him of what had him looking over his shoulder all night. Or what had him looking over his shoulder this week.

He just had to keep reminding himself of what he was doing this for.

For answers for one, as he knew those labs were going to be the key in finding out what was going on here. Finding out what sort of experiments were going on, because it wasn't just mascots. He had a hunch it went way deeper than that, and he was going to figure out how far that hole went.

The other reason-

“So, where all does this thing go?”

“Where doesn’t it go? The tram visits all the major areas in the park! It even leads to the resort- if we were going that-a-way. You know, we should go check that out sometime! Surely the Grand Raccoon Resort could withstand a couple of years of low maintenance; that place is built to survive even the harshest of storms! It helps that there’s no direct tunnels underneath it. And wait until you see the golf course-!”

Ed smiled to himself as Rambley went off on a lengthy partially promotional description of the resort.

Yeah, he wasn’t going anywhere.

“Ooh, you’ve got a goofy smile there. Whacha thinking about?”

“Uh...”

Great time to draw a blank, Ed.

“You.”

Smooth.

“D’aww! Only good things, I hope,” Rambley said with a lopsided smile.

“I’m kinda curious to see where this bad blood between you and Lloyd got started,” Ed said a little more tactfully.

“...Oh yeah, we were going to watch that. Well, don’t be shocked when I say that a cartoon alone can’t express my... ugh, friendship with Lloyd. And if it did, it would probably be the one where he keeps me up all night singing and I keep trying to sabotage his performance. Unsuccessfully, I might add.”

“I think I remember that one. Was he that awful in real life?” Ed asked jokingly.

“Eh, I don’t remember.”

Ed wouldn’t have thought twice about that comment if not for the sudden look of alarm Rambley got and how quickly he backpedaled.

“No, wait! I meant- Yeesh, what am I saying? Of course I remember Lloyd. I’m just trying my hardest not to,” he rushed out. “Buuut I’d be happy to tell you more about me and Mollie, if you’d like!”

That was odd. But it had been a long day and anyone as tired as they were might say something weird or think that something they said innocently might be taken seriously. Rambley was a little literal at times.

And seeing Rambley’s downright begging smile didn’t encourage him to keep digging. After all, they made a pact for full honesty now. Ed was going to trust him.

“Sure. Tell me about her.”

“Oookay, where do I begin?”

The rest of the tram ride was filled with anecdotes about Rambley and Mollie. Some taken from cartoons, others sounded like they happened in reality, and though Rambley had already told him plenty about Mollie talking about her again seemed to assure him. Even when he was repeating himself.

It assured Ed too. Assured him that they were doing the right thing.

Whatever it took, they were getting Mollie back.

...

It was only a matter of time before Barlow made it inside. Barlow was a restless thing, he was. He would occasionally make it to the gates and wander around outside, marking his territory, but never having the care to venture past those iron bars.

Tonight he did, and tonight he discovered a weakness and forced his way in.

He picked up their scent quickly. Perplexingly, considering his smooshed nose, always leaking fluid like a faucet. He discovered a faint trail leading around the back of the castle and into the gift shop.

Because of course this lumbering creature would make his way straight into the gift shop. Which he did, and then he proceeded to tear through the place. It didn't matter if the lights flickered or the music blares, Barlow was on a mission- sniffing around all the stuff his targets had touched.

Until he eventually heard the faint sounds of talking. He lifted his head, recognizing the voices he had heard earlier- maybe, or perhaps just recognizing them as voices. He barged out of the gift shop.

He followed them. First, they were coming from outside of the castle, then further down the road by a loudspeaker, and finally echoing loudly out of the open doors leading into the Mineshaft Drop.

Barlow raced after the lure of the sound, bounding across the faded cobblestone pathing and up to the doors before stopping on a dime. He slammed his shoulder in the doorway as he skidded to a clumsy stop.

No doubt he smelled something amiss. The voices were much deeper inside now, steadily increasing in volume as though to coax him in past the front door, through the tunnel, and into the darkness.

His breath came out in harsh, labored pants. Sputtering and drooling as he took in heaves of air that filled his lungs and pumped through his veins.

An enormous creature. A big bag of blood.

One stepping through the doors into the darkness to follow the voices. Unintelligent, unknowing, unable to recognize the repeating phrases calling out to him.

...But alas, there was one thing he did recognize, and that was the ungodly sound of the tram rattling down the tracks.

In an instant Barlow had turned on his heel and was racing across the Hollow, further and further away from Mineshaft Drop. And it didn't matter how loud the volume got, or how much the lights flickered, he didn't come back. He instead rammed the fence until he would surely have knots all over his body and only then remembered how he got in, raced over, and slipped out into the park once more.

And there he went. The oversized lug, hideous mug, bag of blood had broken in like a tornado and was gone without a trace. Never to return- well, until he got mildly distracted by a squirrel or oversized RAT and came back.

Ah well. There was always next time. Haunted Hollow was in near pristine condition- or it would be if Barlow wouldn't have wrecked the gift shop- and eventually that would lure in another beating heart.

And where there was a heart, there was plenty of blood.

The lights inside of the warehouse turned off, with only the one at the entrance coming back on with a buzz and a flicker.

And then things went silent once more. Save for the chirps and chatters of the creatures of the night.

...

...

...

“Hey Laura! I need your help. I need you to come to the Park on Friday and bring Katie and Daryl with you.”

“wtf What?!?! sure I’ll come but why?”

“isn’t that the whole reason Salem kidnapped Rambley ?? because you brought people to the park?”

“Ya and that’s sort of why. Long story short we’ve got to get a keycard from Salem and we need a

distraction to get them out of the house so we can sneak in and get it. So, fake party at the park.”

“wait wait wait, are you saying you’re going to spoiled swamp?”

“That’s the plan.”

“i’m in.”

“Rly?”

“YES. i’ll call Katie tomorrow see if she’ll come. Daryl’s going to say no.”

“Tell him I’ll give him 20 bucks.”

“that should do it lol.”

“I’m bringing some food. what does Rambly like?”

“Food.”

“He really liked the stuff you made for the party. And I think he’s got a sweet tooth.”

“Probably blueberry stuff. Those rations he eats pretty much taste like blueberry and strawberry.”

“hes so baby”

“Hey hey, only I get to call him that /jk.”

“ha ha yeah sure ok.”

“I’ll tell you about today though. Do you remember Barlow the Bully?”

“not really. was that the dog?”

“That’s him. So funny story, we’ve been trying to get to these labs...”

...

The conversation continued for a while with Ed telling Laura most of what had happened that night at the park. He almost worried it would cause her to back out, but no. Nothing could stop Laura once she

heard Spoiled Swamp was on the table, not even the risk of Salem doing something diabolical.

Honestly, Ed hadn't thought much about Salem either. The major threats were Rambley getting seen, Lloyd showing up, Barlow popping in, and actual cops swinging by. Salem was just a bump in the road.

Well, until it was too late to back out.

It wasn't until Ed was standing outside the front gate of Indigo Park in broad daylight waiting for his friends to arrive that he really started to think about how Salem might react. Especially if they figured out someone broke into their house. He could only hope that Salem was more in the business of mean pranks than genuine threats.

Then again, gassing someone wasn't exactly a harmless prank.

But maybe if it was him who did it and not Rambley, Salem would leave him out of it and target Ed instead.

Ed could handle pepper spray; he could probably handle a little gas. Even if he didn't have an audience this time.

His musing was interrupted by Rambley popping up on the standing screen beside the gate.

"You ready, Eddie?" he asked.

"Ready as I'll ever be. You?"

"I think I am. I'm kind of excited!" Rambley chirped. He wrung his hands a little. "Do you think it would be okay if I stuck around as your guide? You don't think they'll figure anything out, do you?"

"You should! And they won't. They'll just think you're like- actually, Laura could've told Katie you were a security guard back when she thought you were.

Everyone probably just thinks you're an aspiring VTuber."

"That's good, right?"

"...I mean technically you are, so... yeah, sure."

"Great! Then I'll do my best to make them right at home! Good thing they'll hear me this time,"
Rambley remarked.

"Yup!"

There was an awkward pause. It was plainly obvious that both were a little nervous.

Or maybe by now the two were able to recognize a plan that could backfire at any second.

But before either could consider calling it off, the sound of voices could be heard walking near the gate. Ed looked over and Rambley got the cue.

“Looks like it’s showtime! I’ll leave it to you to bring ‘em all in,” Rambley said.

Then he promptly blipped off the screen, leaving Ed standing there alone.

“Thanks Buddy,” Ed mumbled. He then started over to greet the others.

Much to his surprise, there were four people walking up instead of three. For a split second he thought they were about to have a repeat of the party, but it was quickly apparent that it was just the one extra, Leo. Who was dressed in normal jeans, a t-shirt, and jacket but had decided to wear the Lloyd suit head. Good ol’ Leo.

Laura led the way. This time she came extra prepared, with her old running shoes and a little backpack that probably had supplies just in case. Katie was wearing hiking boots, Daryl had his hair pulled back in a low ponytail.

Daryl pointed a thumb back at Leo and rolled his eyes as he walked up. Like he was giving a, “Do you believe this guy?”

“Hey, man,” Leo said. His timing suggesting that he probably saw that.

“Hey!”

“Heyyy! Gang’s all here,” Laura said. She gave Ed a friendly smack on the arm. “Let’s get moving.”

Ed noticed her eagerness immediately. Surely, she didn’t think she was going to Spoiled Swamp, right?... No. He’d been very clear on what the plan was.

“Sure. Come on in,” Ed said.

He led them to the open front gate expecting Rambley to pop up at the same screen, but he didn’t. He shrugged it off and continued leading them inside.

This gave Rambley a few spare seconds to size up his audience through the cameras as he got himself fully into character. He recognized them all in an instant but was in for a few surprises.

Such as the shocking reveal that Katie's blond hair had been a wig- she actually had shoulder length brown hair- and Daryl's wasn't.

That was only strengthening Rambley's 'that guy didn't even come in a costume' theory.

But he stalled long enough. As they approached the turnstile, and with Ed looking up at the screen expectantly, Rambley made his appearance. Popping onto the screen above them in his colorful, toonish glory.

"Hi there and welcome back to Indigo Park! I'm Rambley, Rambley the Raccoon, and I'll be your tour guide during your exploration adventure! Oooh, I recognize a couple of returning faces! And not just my good friend Lloyd." Rambley winked.

Leo waved and Rambley gave a little wave back.

“Now before you come in, I must insist that you each get a Critter Cuff for safety purposes. But don’t you worry, they’re very fashionable!” Rambley said. His cartoon self holding up his arm, which now had a Critter Cuff on his wrist. He gestured an arm to the right. “Step right into the Critter Corner and we’ll get you strapped in!”

Taking the cue, Ed led them back over and into the gift shop. Letting Laura lead Katie and Leo in first, talking animatedly as she did, and getting held back at the door by Daryl.

“What’s the deal with the cuffs?” he asked.

“They’re like heart monitors that open doors,” Ed said.

“Yeah, but why does he want us wearing them?”

“They, uh... They track our location in the park-.”
Daryl was already putting his hands up. “Just so he

knows where we are if something happens. Like if we got separated or lost.”

“I’m out.”

“Come on. Don’t tell me you’re scared of a pedometer with a raccoon face on it.”

“Hey, I’ve gotta draw the line somewhere and I draw the line at tracking chips. No matter what they-.”

“Ohmigosh, I love it! It’s like those bands I used to get at Fun Spot,” Katie said just loud enough to interrupt the two.

They looked over to see Laura putting a Critter Cuff on her wrist.

Ed looked back to Daryl expectantly and watched as that line silently moved a little further.

Daryl shook a finger at him, then gave an agreeable, “Shut up.”

Ed didn't say a word. His grin said plenty.

But as Daryl shuffled over to get his Critter Cuff- no doubt Katie would have to put it on him herself- and while Leo was poking around some of the merch, Laura came back to join Ed.

"Hey, can we talk for a second?" she asked, pointing outside. He nodded and she called to the others, "One second, guys! We'll be right back!"

"Where are you going?" Leo asked.

"Just out here. Don't worry about it," Laura said. She grabbed Ed's arm and pulled him outside. "Hey, change of plans. You give these guys the grand tour, I'll run to Spoiled Swamp and get the keycard."

"Wait, you? What?"

"I know it sounds crazy, but I was thinking about it last night and it makes more sense if someone else sneaks over there. Think about it, Salem knows you're going to be here and they're going to hear all

this.” She gestured between them and the gift shop. “They know they’ve got to watch you, but they don’t know to watch me. I could sneak right in!”

“...Why’ve I got a feeling that the only thing you were thinking of was the fastest way into the swamp?” Ed asked knowingly.

“Okay, maybe I’ve got my own reasons for wanting to go. My own nostalgic and collection-based reasons. But you know I’m right,” Laura said.

And despite how insane it sounded; it did sort of make sense. But...

“Hold that thought. Let’s get a second opinion,” Ed said.

He walked back to the front gate and the screen beside it with Laura trailed along behind him. He waved for the camera before tapping on the screen, and then tapping on the screen again, with Rambley appearing on it as he did.

“I was wondering where you two ran off to. What’s up?” Rambley said.

“Laura has an idea,” Ed said. He looked to her, signaling for her to explain.

“Okay, so, I know what’s going on with Salem. Ed’s already told me all about what happened, and you need to get a keycard from them. So, I was thinking maybe it’d be a better idea if Ed stuck with the guys and I went myself to Spoiled Swamp and get the keycard,” she explained.

Rambley blinked a little. “Laura, that’s a terrible idea.”

Laura’s mouth dropped open.

“I-I mean not a terrible idea! That’s a really clever idea!” Rambley quickly corrected. An animated sweat drop appearing on his head. “But also a pretty dangerous one. You don’t want to be walking around the park alone. Trust me, I live here, and I can’t even do it without getting into trouble!”

“You let Ed do it.”

“Well, look at him! He was built for this.”

Laura was clearly not amused.

“I’m going to Spoiled Swamp and I’m going to get that keycard,” she said defiantly.

“No, you are not going,” Rambley said flatly.

“You’re going to stop me?” Laura challenged with a small smirk.

Rambley continued looking unphased.

And then the gate to their right shut on them.

“Oh yeah, good point,” Ed mumbled.

Laura crossed her arms with a semi-patient inhale.

“Just hear me out. You haven’t even heard me out.”

“...Okay.” Rambley reopened the gate. “Give me one good reason why it would be a good idea. And don’t be cheeky, that’s my thing.”

Laura pursed her lips and considered her words carefully, and then-

“Because they’re going to be watching Ed like a hawk and there’s no way in hell he’s getting anywhere near that swamp without them noticing.”

...

And Rambley deflated instantly.

“...Well, she’s got me there. Eddie?” he looked to him.

“She’s right. Salem knows you and me are working together. If they see me over there, they’ll know something’s up. But if they see me with my friends, they might not even know Laura’s here.”

Rambley still looked unsure, worried even.

“Hey, I’ve got an idea. You have my phone; Laura’s got her phone. She could call you and you two could use that to talk without having to use the screens. Then Salem really won’t suspect anything,” Ed suggested.

“That’s... a really good idea,” Rambley admitted reluctantly. He sighed. “Okay, okay. If you really want to do this then we can. I’ll lead you right to Salem Swamp- but you have to do everything I tell you, okay? If I say run, you run. If I say jump, you jump. And if I say Lloyd, you disappear.”

“You got it!” Laura said.

Ed noticed Daryl coming out of the gift shop, probably having heard the doors close and open and coming to check it out. He pointed him out to Laura and Rambley, with Laura rushing back to distract him. Ed sent Rambley an okay gesture before following after her, the screen shutting off right after he left.

Which, alright, this was certainly a shake-up, but not a huge deal! Rambley still would've had to watch two places at once on the camera. In fact, now he had Rambley leading the majority of the group, and he knew the safe spots and the dangerous ones. Likely he would be able to keep them safe while Laura slipped under the radar.

All Rambley had to do was watch and entertain the guests while guiding Laura. That was an easy enough plan! Easy for someone sitting at a desk who could flip between screens.

Except Rambley wasn't sitting at a desk. He was hiding out in a lemonade stand in the main plaza, waiting for Laura- or now Ed- and their friends to come through. Because it wasn't enough to watch them from an office anymore, now he wanted to see them with his own eyes, and hear them, and be part of the fun.

And he was going to have to manage that while leading Laura through the no man's land that was directly around Salem's place.

This was a recipe for disaster and Rambley knew it.

Well, it was too late to back out now. What's the worst that could happen? Ed led his friends inside Indigo Park. Instead of stopping at Rambley's Railroad, they headed directly into the main plaza. For most of them, this was the only part of the park they were familiar with, but it was their first time seeing it in the light of day.

They were walking past the fountain when Leo spoke up.

"Hey, you got the place cleaned up!"

"Sure did," Ed said proudly.

If only they had seen the fountain before it got tidied up.

"It looks great. Sorry about bailing on you. We were planning to help clean up, but then the cops showed up..." Leo trailed off apologetically.

“Don’t worry about it. It didn’t take long.”

As a matter of fact, it took Rambley and him less than an hour to gather up all the garbage and get rid of it. It wasn’t a big deal. The windows, on the other hands-

“Did anybody get arrested? I didn’t see anything online about it,” Katie asked.

“Not that I know of, but it was a close call. We could’ve all been looking at an overnight trip,” Ed said.

“I don’t think they were going to arrest anybody just for sneaking into this dump. Break up the party? Sure, but going around arresting everybody? No way. They’d just take in whoever started running their mouths to make an example out of and call it a night.”

“It’s not a dump,” Ed said.

“You’re a dump,” Laura chimed in, busy looking at her phone.

“Yeah, that.”

Daryl gave a sarcastic laugh and gestured to the crumbling wall.

Ed pointedly ignored him.

“And it wasn’t just trespassing. Russ and Shaun were out here breaking windows. That’s vandalism. It doesn’t matter how closed the place is, that’s a one-way ticket to jail. Do not pass go do not collect two-hundred dollars.”

There was a weird pause over the group. He noticed a cringe on Daryl’s face, as if he had said something wrong, and looked around to see Katie looking uncomfortable as well. Leo was unreadable through the Lloyd head, but his silence did enough.

“...Were you guys breaking windows too?” Ed guessed.

“Pfft, no. Just, uh... You know Russ disappeared, right?” Daryl asked.

Ed looked at him for a second before his eyes went wide.

He really hoped that had nothing to do with Indigo Park. He really, really hoped it didn't.

He looked at Laura for clarification, and maybe even assurance, but she was texting on her phone. Probably with Rambley.

“Russ disappeared?” Ed asked.

Now Laura noticed. “Hmm?... Oh! Yeah, but not really. You know Russ, he's probably just crashing on someone's couch.”

That... was true. Russ once vanished off the face of the Earth for a few weeks right after high school graduation. Everyone knew about it because his parents were asking everywhere. It turned out him

and some friends split town to go do something and didn't tell anybody where they went. The next time it happened, his parents weren't asking around and barely anyone noticed.

Ed really, really hoped Russ was off on an unexpected vacation somewhere.

...And not sitting in the bottom of Lloyd's stomach.

The disturbing mental image was cut off by Laura's phone ringing.

"Hold on, I've got to take this," she said. She took a few steps away and answered. "Mom, I'm kinda busy... Alright. One second." She muffled her phone into her shirt. "You guys go ahead. I'll catch up."

"We can wait. We'll wait over there and give you some privacy," Katie offered.

"No, this could be a while, and I don't want to mess up the whole day. I'll just hang out in the café and catch up when I'm done."

“If you’re sure...”

“Don’t worry about her. That’s probably the safest place in the park,” Daryl suggested.

“Actually-!” Both Daryl and Katie jumped as Rambley’s voice suddenly chimed up from behind them, his image on the nearby information kiosk.

“The safest place in the park has got to be Steam & Steel Souvenirs, but it’s a close second. Hey, maybe if we make good enough time, we can stop in on the way back! Whaddya say?”

“Sounds like a plan!” Ed said.

“That’s the spirit! Let’s get moving, Team! I’ll keep an eye on Laura and make sure to help lead her where she needs to go,” Rambley said. Then he blipped out.

“You heard the boss,” Ed said. He then started ahead, hoping it would encourage the others to follow him.

It did, in fact. Leo caught up to his side quickly, with Daryl and the somewhat reluctant Katie following afterwards.

“I don’t feel right about leaving her alone...” she whispered to him.

“She’ll be fine. She’s a big girl,” Daryl said. He then leaned in and murmured, “Probably meeting up with someone,” out of the corner of his mouth.

She hummed and let it go.

Laura, meanwhile, walked to the door of the café to make it look like she was heading inside. But then she stayed back and watched around the corner until the others were on their way.

“Okay, they bought it. I’m in the clear,” she said into the phone.

“Good!” Rambley chirped back. “Are you ready to go? There’s still time to back out, I won’t be upset if you do! It’s a pretty risky mission.”

“I’m good! Do I just start heading to Spoiled Swamp?”

“The main path is a little hard to get through. But don’t worry, I already planned a route that should lead you right there without any-!... detours.”

“What’s that mean?”

“A detour is a way around a blocked route.”

“No, I get that. I meant that tone.”

“Oh, uh, heh. I was just thinking of a funny thing that happened to me and Eddie the other day. But I’m getting sidetracked! First off, you need to follow them for a little way. Ed’s taking them to Berryburg, so follow that direction and I’ll tell you when to turn!”

“Got it,” Laura said. She started to walk back onto the street when Rambley unexpectedly continued.

“In fact... maybe I could just show you myself.”

That piqued Laura’s interest immediately. “You’re going to come with me?”

“...Laura, I’ve got a confession to make. Turn around.” She did. “See that lemonade stand over there?”

It was hard to not notice the bright yellow stand.

“Alice’s?”

“Yup. There’s a mascot hiding inside of that lemonade stand right now.”

“...Is it you?”

“ ... ”

Rambley’s head peeked over the top.

“Yes, it is.”

Laura gave a small sigh of relief and hung up her phone. “You didn’t have to be so ominous about it. What are you doing here?”

“You see, since there’s guests in the park unaccounted for, I decided to tail them and make sure they stay safe. I know it’s a bad idea, but... I’ll be able to see a lot better from the street than the screens,” Rambley explained as he hopped over the side of the stand and dusted off his tail.

“Ahh! Your motion capture suit is so cute!” Laura gushed.

Rambley rubbed the back of his head with a goofy smile. “Whaddya mean? I already showed it to you!” he said with a little laugh.

“Yeah, but you didn’t have it on!”

“Okay, okay. I might be adorable, but we can’t get distracted.”

Rambley soaked up the compliments like a sponge, but he knew there was no time to waste. So, he beckoned Laura along and they started down the street side-by-side. By now the others were totally out of sight.

“I don’t know if Ed told you, but what’s you’re looking for is a keycard into the labs. It might be labelled as Indigo Park Headquarters or Indigo Park Labs, but it’s going to look fancy and official. Many of the locations in the park are color coded and I think the labs are white or grey, so it will probably be that color.”

“White or grey keycard for the labs. Got it!”

“Now here’s the thing about Salem. I don’t think you’ll be in real danger if they catch you, BUT they’re cunning and sneaky. They wouldn’t be above taking you captive as bait to get me to Spoiled Swamp. Or

worse, just coming over here and throwing gas cans in my house...”

“Wait, you mean- and setting your house on fire?”

“I sure hope not! Probably they’ll just knock me out and take me somewhere to do some cartoon embarrassing stuff that I’m going to have nightmares about for the rest of my life.”

That was considerably more ominous than if he had just said Salem might burn his house down.

“But you’ll be fine. Just, if they do find you, don’t say anything to make them mad. Y’know, don’t call them a villain. Don’t ask them about the eye.”

“What’s wrong with their eye?”

“It’s, umm... it’s covered up for a reason, we’ll say that.”

Now Laura was insanely curious to what could be under there, but continued efforts to ask just hit a

continual dead end. So, she supposed it was either very obvious, like a missing eye, or he just didn't know.

They walked down past the Ferris wheel where the path deviated towards Berryburg. There was another road too, which led past the tram station.

“Do you remember your way around the park?”
Rambley asked.

“Uh... Sort of?” Laura said.

“Sort of, huh? Then it's a good thing I brought this!”

Rambley reached behind himself and after a moment of fiddling, pulled a map out from behind him. He must've had it hidden under his skintight suit. He handed it over and she opened it to see a path marked with red marker leading around some of the attractions and up to Spoiled Swamp.

“Follow this and it’ll lead you right to it, and you can also ask me for help. One more thing! Here, let me show you.”

Laura offered the map, and he pointed to a place where the red line seemed to go around and through a building instead of following the path.

“This path is blocked, so the only way through is through the Giganta-Gift Shop. It shouldn’t be hard at all, just don’t get distracted passing through.”

“I won’t. Unless there’s really cute stuff there.”

“Most of the stuff has my face on it, so yes, there’s going to be,” Rambley said with a grin. “Any questions?”

“Umm... one. Any chance of Lloyd showing up...?” she asked uneasily.

“I worried about that myself, but the last I checked- while you guys were coming inside- Lloyd’s holed up in his theater again. So, we should be in the clear!

Just as long as nobody scrapes their knee or is smuggling in cat food,” Rambley said. He pointed down the path. “Just take a right down there and you’ll be on your way! Just be careful and watch your step.”

“Thanks! And you too. Make sure nobody sees you.”

“Oh, don’t worry about me. I’m a pro at this! I just get a little... distracted sometimes,” Rambley admitted with a sheepish smile.

“Don’t get distracted worrying about me, I can handle this,” Laura assured. “And above all else, do NOT get seen by Katie.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because if she sees you, she’s going to scream, and then she’s going to latch onto you, and we won’t get her off. Trust me.”

“Oh! Heh, aww! I better not get caught then because this guy is taken,” Rambley said, pointing a thumb to his chest.

Laura didn't say anything, but she smiled like she found it funny.

“What? Don't believe me?” Rambley asked.

“No, I believe you.”

“Great! Now we oughta get moving. Lemme call you back and we can just keep the call open like a radio.”

Rambley quickly found her in the contacts and called her, they made sure the call went through, and then Laura started on her way. She glanced back to see Rambley waving and waved back, then disappeared around the corner. Rambley hurried off to catch up with Ed and his group right after.

Most of the path Laura took was part of the east expansion of Main Street, hidden behind Lloyd's theater.

It went fine until she reached a place where the road was collapsed in. It looked like it had fallen into a tunnel that was now filled halfway with moving water. It didn't smell like an open sewer, but she wasn't going to risk trying to swim through it anyways and instead took Rambley's suggestion to cut through the back of the mall.

It took a few tries, but eventually she found a broken full-length window and was able to step into one of the high-fashion clothing stores located in the mall. Ritzy clothing that cost a fortune still hung on the racks, only denoted to be Indigo Park related by often hidden little raccoon head decals.

She was determined to not get distracted, though the character themed pumps were awful cute-

An unexpected whistle from the phone caused her to jump and quickly get back on track. She lifted it to her ear as she walked out of the store.

“I’m here!”

“Hey Buddy! Y’know I was just wondering and I’ve got to ask: what gotcha into liking Salem of all my pals?”

“What’s not to like? They’re cool!”

“Well, if you want to get technical, technically they’re the cool one. But there’s got to be a bigger story than that!”

“Okay, if you want to know- do you remember those Indigo Cartoons where they were all travelling around on a train?”

“Ooo, the Big Train Adventure years! They’re some of my favorites!”

“Do you remember the episode where Rambley- uh, you. Where you and Salem were stuck on that mountain in the snow and you had to melt ice off the tracks, and there was a yeti?”

“The Raccoon Who Could! That was REALLY a favorite of mine! It’s not quite Christmastime without it,” Rambley gushed. “A real railroad adventure! The only downside was that mushy scene with me and Lloyd. Talk about a ‘yikes’.”

“What are you talking about? That was great! And that scene where he thought they got trapped in the avalanche- and the hug, that was just SO GOOD.”

“Oh please. Lloyd wouldn’t know sentimentality even if he actually knew how to spell it.”

“Whoa. What’s your beef with Lloyd?”

“I don’t have beef! Whatever that means. I just think he’s a puffed-up blowhard who’s way too popular considering that I took over for him,” Rambley said in a very huffy way.

“Don’t tell Leo that, he’s his favorite. He used to be Ed’s favorite too back when we were kids-.”

“Wait, wait, what?!” Rambley sputtered. “I must’ve heard you wrong because I could’ve sworn that you said Lloyd was Ed’s favorite.”

Looks like the open sewage wasn’t the only thing Laura had to watch her step for, because she walked right into that.

“Eh, for a little while. But he really liked all the characters a lot. Anyways, so I got into that episode because of that scene with Salem-.”

“Nuh-nuh, no. We are not just ignoring that. How long was Lloyd his favorite? Like, the whole time you guys were coming here as kids?”

“Oh, come on. Don’t tell me you’re jealous-.”

“I’m not jealous-.”

“-over Ed picking another character other than you when he was a kid.”

“-I’m just disappointed.”

“He didn’t even know you!”

“...You got me there.” Rambley sighed. “And you’re totally right. I’m overreacting.”

“Don’t worry about it. He probably doesn’t even remember.”

“Right. Maybe.” Rambley still sounded a little disappointed, but he continued, “So it was that cartoon that made you like Salem?”

“It did! Funny enough, but it was the episode where they were being nice, and you guys were teaming up that made them my favorite. And that part when they caught Rambley- you- whatever, him from falling! That was just so cool. That was my first time really seeing a bad guy act good. Totally opened my eyes.”

“I think I get it now. You were drawn to the good inside of the bad guy! Y’know, I often considered if Salem was a softie underneath that cool exterior. I certainly think they were in the cartoon!”

“What about real-life Salem? Think they’re hiding a soft side?”

“...I think I’ll refrain from answering that while you’re approaching Salem’s doorstep.”

Laura gave him a playful scoff and continued onward towards the entrance to the mall.

The foyer of the mall was barren. The fountain not working but still filled with surprisingly clear-ish water. Light filtering through the skylight high above. There was something somber but poignant about it, but Laura was sure it looked a lot better when it was open.

Ed loved exploring places like this. He was into that liminal space stuff; he could look at a place like this and see beauty in it.

Laura could too, sort of, but most of all she just felt sad. A small ache bubbling in her chest. She still took a picture from the front doors before she walked out.

It wasn't too much longer of a hike to Spoiled Swamp after that point. Most of it was in silence as she and Rambley focused on stealthily getting to their designated location.

Spoiled Swamp was a more open area of the park. The attractions were lower to the ground and all the shops were only one floor, leaving a lot of room to look at the blue sky above. Reaching into that sky were fake, withered pines with few or without branches, pointing up like spikes. Supposedly effected by the toxin permeating the swamp.

There was a creek that snaked its way through the area with a green painted bottom so it looked like a sludgy, polluted river. Now the water was a little muggy and shallower than it was supposed to be, giving the illusion even better than the paint. Though

unlike when she was a kid, she had no desire to wade in it.

At least it was mostly alongside the path with plenty of still intact little bridges. And with how shallow it was, she probably could've just stepped across if it wasn't too slick.

There were also fake mushrooms all over the place. Laura remembered climbing on them when she was little and though they looked grimy now, she could still see the mischievously smiling faces on their trunks.

But there was another presence. One creeping over the hedges and slowly climbing its way onto the less kept attractions. One with the sole desire to cover and consume all.

“Oh my god, there's so much kudzu! Where'd this all come from?!” Laura cried.

“Shh! They could be around!”

Laura clamped her mouth and lifted the phone close to it, whispering a discreet, "Right, sorry." Then continued further into Spoiled Swamp.

It didn't take long to find Salem's Shack- there was a sign pointing her right there, leading her right past the Stench Stomper coaster. A rather compact square-shaped coaster that climbed up and then zigzagged around before dropping down into itself and back to the bottom. It also took her past a gazebo where animatronic frogs used to perform, which had fully collapsed in. Only one frog left buried in the rubble.

Salem's Shack was the highlight. It was a rickety-looking cabin with a little garden of fake mushrooms and signs out front. The signs reading things like "Stay Out!" and "Scram!", with a few having skull and crossbones- with the skulls being shaped intentionally like Rambley's head.

Laura took a deep breath and slipped her still on phone into her pocket before walking up. Then promptly slipped on a slick plastic rock leading to the

door, stumbling messily, and catching herself with a hand on the door that proceeded to push open and caused her to stumble again. If not for her catching the door jam, she would've faceplanted right into Salem's living room.

And now with her cover totally blown, she looked up prepared to face the music.

But there was nobody there. All that was there was the inside of the shack, which looked distinctly not lived in.

The shack was comprised of three rooms that led directly into each other and then out the back and back onto the path. The first one was the living room. The room had a purple lounge chair and chaise, both of which looked to be vandalized with paint- on purpose- and a bookcase filled with books. All of which had some sort of title relating to potions, toxins, or general villain behavior. There was a corkboard on the wall with scribbles of 'schemes' on it.

The next room was a brewing room for Salem to whip up their toxins. There was a large cauldron that Laura remembered used to stir itself and release puffs of steam. It did neither now. There were shelves of plastic potion bottles and a big basket of plastic purple mushrooms on a table. There was a picture of Rambley on the wall that was being used as a dart board.

The third room was the bedroom. Salem had a hammock in the corner and the room was messy with all sorts of parts for traps. Such as a cartoonishly large bear trap, a cage, red paint for drawing x's, and even a Rambley dummy that sort of looked like a scarecrow and had big button eyes-though it wasn't made of anything soft, just more plastic.

It was all super cute! Only one problem.

Everything Laura had passed was part of the walk-through attraction. None of it was real, and none of the furniture was being used for anything but

sitting there. This couldn't be where Salem was living.

She lifted the phone to her mouth.

"Rambley, I'm in Salem's Shack and there's nothing here!" she whispered.

"Don't panic. I'm sure Salem must've hid it nearby. I doubt they'd leave something as important as an Indigo Park high-clearance keycard out in the open."

"No, I mean there's nothing here. It's just like an exhibit or something, they're not living here."

"Oh- OH! That's... Oh dear. That's not good. Hold on. Let me- hold on."

Laura could hear shifting and crunching.

"What's going on over there?" she asked.

"I'm in the bushes," Rambley mumbled. He put a hand to the side of his head. "Okay, focus. Focus."

He got onto the systems and began to flip through the cameras available, trying to get a bird's eye view of Spoiled Swamp. Then he started to hook onto the interior cameras, seeing outside of the swamp's flume, into the gift shop, the Toxins and Tasties Snack Bar-

Wait, no. The snack bar's cameras was disconnected. He checked the others inside and just the same, nothing.

He switched to the outside cameras to see through the patio and outside dining area, only to find, much to his surprise, that a lot of it had been boarded up.

Oh yeah. That's where they were hiding.

"It looks like Salem's been holing up in the Toxins and Tasties Snack Bar! Or that's what I figure, since they deactivated or destroyed all the cameras inside. But that also means I can't SEE inside, so I'm not even sure if they're home or not," Rambley warned.

“Mmmight go scope it out. And scope out the gift shop while I’m at it.”

“That mmmight not be such a great idea. Just make sure they’re not there first, mmmkay?”

“Mmmaybe. I’ll get back to you.”

Rambley gave a disapproving ‘tsk, tsk’ as the phone fell silent again.

Though now without Laura to listen to, Rambley noticed that he could no longer hear the group. He pricked his ears up, still nothing, and then finally peeked out. Only to find them gone and him getting left behind.

“Fiddlesticks!” he whispered and quickly high-tailed after them.

He found them halfway across Berryburg, right alongside the road that led to the circus district. The top of the carousel could even be seen over the water.

But instead of walking over there, it sounded like there was an intense conversation going on. Rambley listened in and tried to catch up.

“There’s no way,” Katie said.

“It’s true!” Leo insisted.

“No, there’s not- Daryl, back me up.”

“Yeah, I’m with Katie on this one. I think you’re mixing that up with someone leaving pop in the car. And that explodes when it freezes, not heats up,” Daryl volunteered.

“Ed, back me up.”

“I could believe it. You heat something up, you don’t know what gasses it could make,” Ed said.

“Milk doesn’t make gasses, it gets chunky!” Katie protested.

Rambley didn't even have a clue what the conversation was about and yet something about their interactions was so... fascinating! The way they talked and played off each other. Gosh, he could almost imagine his friends in their place, chatting away about something only they knew about.

"It exploded. There were chunks of it all over the place, stuck to the windows. The whole car smelled like bad eggs and tuna for months!"

"Ough. Leo, I don't want to hear that! Geez..."

...On second thought, maybe this wasn't something he and his friends would talk about.

But he could chime in! So many places to add in a fact here or a tidbit there. Maybe someone would even ask him to back them up. "Rambley, back me up. Is it possible for a carton of milk to explode if it's left in a hot car?" He didn't know, but he could give his opinion. Fun facts too! Maybe even get a chance to dip into a spiel about the time Indigo Park tried to

serve special Malted Milk Refreshers that kept curdling.

It was gross, but fun! Entertaining. He could be entertaining. He could be a good friend.

He really wanted his friends back.

...Or maybe he just really wanted friends.

The temptation to give himself up and let what happens happen crept up on him a few times, but every time better judgement swooped in. So, he kept his distance, kept quiet, and watched from afar-

Clank!

Until something wooshed past his head and clattered against the tin sign on the stand he was hiding behind. What was that, a rock?

Rambley looked back only to see something flying at him and ducked. Another thing flew past and hit the sign, clanked, and bounced off.

It WAS a rock! Someone was throwing rocks at him?! Who in the world-?!"

"Did you hear that?" Daryl asked. "Sounds like someone's throwing stuff."

"It's probably nothing..." Ed said, though was looking in the direction with concern.

"What if it's Laura?" Katie asked.

"Why would Laura be throwing stuff?"

"If it's Laura, then she's screwing with us," Daryl said.

"Still..." Katie started to walk over when Ed hurried up instead.

"I'll go check. Wait here," he said.

Then he began to slowly make his way over, more concerned about them following than anything

jumping out. He even stopped and held a hand up for them to wait when he heard Leo trying to follow.

Because that was definitely someone throwing rocks and he doubted it was Laura or Lloyd. He thought it was Rambley trying to get his attention, and when he peeked around the stand he fully expected to see him.

But he didn't. Rambley was nowhere to be seen. He looked around for him, but there was no sign or trail of the raccoon.

He had to be following them, Ed guessed, and despite how weird that was he shrugged it off and returned to the others. Taking it as a sign to keep moving.

"I don't know what it was, but it's not Laura," he said.

"Maybe's it's Russ," Leo joked.

Russ stalking them around the park randomly throwing rocks?

“I wouldn’t put it past him,” Ed said. “But I don’t know. Maybe we should keep moving.”

The others agreed. Katie was the most unsure about moving on but was finally won over and they started to head towards Raspberry’s house, since Ed knew the area was safe. Assuming that Rambley was trailing behind them watching and listening, and that made him feel a little safer.

What he didn’t know was that the second they started turning around, Rambley made a break for it. He looked around for a hiding spot and noticed the tall, swirled slide.

That would do! Surely nobody would risk sliding down the world’s tallest kiddie slide- both for safety and reputation purposes. Rambley sneakily darted over and scrambled up the narrow stairs- which were thankfully blocked halfway down, allowing him to go up undetected as long as he crawled up them.

He reached the top and climbed inside the woodgrain textured plastic tube. It was a little tighter than expected- something must've fell on it as the tunnel was a little squished in- but he fit and waited for the voices to leave. Unable to focus enough to check the cameras without risking losing his grip and sliding down the slide, which would definitely be noticeable.

But thankfully, they never got closer. Ed must've convinced them not to poke around, though he swore he heard someone nearby. Either way, they soon started to fade off.

Rambley breathed a sigh of relief and tried to push himself back out.

Except something tugged, and his stomach dropped.

Something had caught onto his mo-cap suit. He wasn't stuck in the traditional sense, but any wrong move could lead to a rip or tear- and he only had a couple of these suits! He couldn't afford to risk slicing it up. Not to mention how the new seam

would probably irritate his fur, as this was supposed to be a second skin.

He wedged his arm down to try and feel the source of the catch while holding himself with his feet hooked on the edge of the entrance. His other hand was holding the phone and trying to keep him from slipping.

“Okay, Rambley, don’t panic! If you start panicking, you’re going to rip it a whole lot more. Let’s just take a deep breath and try to work this out,” he thought to himself. The voice in his head resembling what he might’ve said to a panicking parkgoer.

Yup, he just had to take it slow. He had all the time in the world!

...

...

...Were those footsteps?

Rambley lifted his ears and listened. Yes, he heard footsteps, and they were coming in this direction. Was it Laura? It couldn't be!

He checked the phone and realized that in his frenzy to get up here he must've ended the call. So, he couldn't ask her. But it couldn't BE her anyways. There's no way she could've gotten here that fast.

It was whoever threw that rock. What if it was that guy from the other night? That Russ guy who disappeared? What if he was secretly staying in the park, waiting for the moment when Rambley let his guard down to attack him and make him into a furry coat!

Or worse, waited until Rambley was stuck in an embarrassing situation like this and then took videos to post all over the internet! Not only would his secret be revealed and his life in jeopardy, but his image would be ruined! The world would discover all about living mascots because one of them got stuck going down a kiddie slide!

He was beginning to hyperventilate as the footsteps approached the bottom of the stairs. He couldn't risk it; he tried to let go and sacrifice his suit.

He could hear his suit tear, but unfortunately for him it was a strong, sturdy suit and now held his weight. Meaning that he STILL was stuck in the slide.

Grabbing desperately at the tear he finally found the safety hazard piece of broken plastic on the bottom that had caught him, but it was not letting go. It held his suit tight.

Whoever it was had almost reached the top of the stairs.

Desperately, he coiled his tail and fluffed his fur as much as he could to block himself from sight and could only hope that somehow, they would think he was a plushie or a non-living mascot.

Then he waited with closed eyes and bated breath.

And then the worst case scenario presented itself.

“Well, well, well. How’s it going, Butterball? I’ve gotta say, this is exactly where I expected ya to be.”

It was Salem.

Rambley covered his face with his free hand. His cheeks burning with embarrassment.

“I’m not stuck. My suit got hooked on something and I didn’t want to tear it,” he muttered.

“Yeah, yeah. Sure.”

“What are you doing here?” Rambley mumbled.

“Ya don’t sound happy to see me. And here I thought my invitation must’a gotten lost in the mail.”

And suddenly Rambley remembered what kind of vulnerable position he was really in.

“I didn’t get one either!” he said defensively. “Ed didn’t invite them, they- they wanted to come see the place. One of them is a really big fan of Lloyd.”

“I’m sure that just eats you up inside,” Salem said smugly.

“I’m not jumping for joy, but I’ll live,” Rambley answered. Though that slight edge of sarcasm gave him away more than he would’ve liked.

“Sounds like it’s just not your day, Little Buddy. Tell ya what, I’ll help you out.”

Rambley could hear the sinister grin through their voice.

“You just sit tight and I’ll get somethin’ to grease you up with.”

“For the last time, I’m not stuck,” Rambley said huffily.

“Sure.”

Salem left and Rambley struggled to get free in vain, as the skunk returned very quickly. Either they

already had this planned, or they already had something planned and Rambley had just made it easier.

“This stuff’ll jar ya loose,” Salem said, swirling something in what sounded like a bucket.

“What is it...?” Rambley dared to ask.

“Prob’ly the most toxic thing in the park. This’ll eat through anything if you give it long enough, even big hairballs stuck down the drain. Real nasty stuff.”

Was it... acid? Some sort of cleaning agent? ...Or was it something Salem made?

Rambley broke into a nervous sweat. “Salem, you don’t have to do this...!”

“And leave ya dangling here? Now what kinda friend would that make me?” Salem asked. Then they dumped the sludgy fluid all over the raccoon.
“Bottom’s up!”

The smell was what hit him first. Overwhelming and old, stale. Kinda had a gross dirt smell. Sludgy blackish blue fluid oozed down the tube underneath him with chunks of stuff floating in it.

It was disgusting, but the immediate burning pain he was expecting didn't come.

“Ugh, wh-what is this stuff?”

“Dunno. Whatever was at the bottom of the Port-o-John.”

Oh.

OH.

OH NO.

“UGH! Salem, you're the worst!” Rambley yelled. He kicked his legs trying to hit them to no avail. All they had to do was step back and watch the show. “I swear, when I get out of here-!”

“Aww, don’t worry about thanking me! I don’t do my acts ‘o kindness for the reward,” Salem said. They snickered behind the back of their hand before using it to shield their nose. “Smell ya later, Stinky!”

“ARGHH!”

Salem gave their trademark laugh as they hopped over the side of the stairs and waltzed off to wherever, leaving Rambley in the slime in the tube.

“I swear- *hic* I swear!” Rambley was steaming and gagging, and about to start swearing for real. He thumped his fist on the side of the tube in frustration. “I SWEAR I’m gonna get ba- AGH!”

Suddenly the hold on his suit decided to release and he found him plummeting down the kiddie slide turned water slide and slipping right out of the bottom and landing face-first in the mushy mulch beneath.

He groaned and dragged his face up off the ground, before gasping and looking around quickly. But there

was nobody there, nobody able to see him, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

He was going to take this as a sign to do what he should've done initially; drag himself home and watch the cameras like a good little raccoon. All while scrubbing this- ugh- out of his fur. And sewing his suit.

With a sigh, Rambley started to walk his way back out of Berryburg. Thankfully, Ed's phone and his hand holding it had been mostly spared from everything except a little dirty mulch, so he was able to call Laura back through the contacts. He kept a careful eye and ear out as he did, knowing Salem could still be lurking about.

It didn't take Laura long to answer.

"Hey, sorry! Did I hang up on you?"

"No, it was me. I got into a... ugh, sticky situation."

"Are you okay? Was it the bushes?"

“I wish,” Rambley mumbled. “Don’t you worry about me! I just need to head home and get cleaned up, but I’ll keep checking in through the cameras. Even more now that I’m not following Eddie.”

“Aww, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I walked right into it headfirst... Anyways! Umm... I had a, uh... Hmm...” Rambley considered his words carefully. “Let’s say that I’m not the only one who’s away from home. I just ran into an old friend, and they’re probably still nearby, so I can’t say much about it.”

“Wait, you mean Salem?”

“Can’t say,” Rambley said in a dodgy way. “Just know that it doesn’t matter who you are, it takes a while to walk from one side of Indigo Park to the other- but not forever!”

Laura got the message for the most part. He seemingly just ran into Salem- who didn’t kidnap

him, thankfully- and they were over in Berryburg, far from where Laura was currently creeping around their diner-turned-house. At least now she didn't have to keep trying to figure out if someone was in there.

“Got it! I'm heading in now.”

“Be careful! There could be... traps,” Rambley said quietly. It sounded like behind his hand. But then he smelled the stuff on that hand and audibly gagged. “Okay, I gotta get home. Good luck!”

“You too!”

Leaving the phone on, but slipping it into her back pocket, Laura made it back to the front and tried the door. No good, and the windows were boarded up too. She continued checking around until she found the back door which was hidden in a mess of an overgrown tangle with only a faint path leading to it. She tried the door, the knob rattly, and found it unlocked. Though she had to give a sharp tug to get it open.

She was instantly hit with the overpowering smell of perfume. Laura didn't even mind the smell of perfume and it made her cough. Undeterred, she took a deep breath, pinched her nose, and stepped inside.

This was the diner's kitchen, obviously, but now it was filled with a lot more than cooking supplies and utensils. There were also some boxes and various beakers, pots, and pans lined on the counter. Stretched out on the island in the center of the kitchen was a map with notes after notes layered on top of it.

Laura tried to sneak a look at one, but it was nearly indecipherable. Everything was in some sort of shorthand. One was apparently on Lloyd.

"Lloyd vax 12-20 in btcab 3 mg."

Unless Salem was planning on giving Lloyd a vaccine, Laura couldn't make heads or tails of this-

and she was halfway through learning all the medical shorthand!

She took a picture with her phone, still leaving the call on and getting a twitch of a smile when she heard Rambley grumbling through it, and then kept looking.

The source of the smell was on one of the stovetops. One of the pots was empty but utterly reeked of the perfume smell, and on the counter beside it were some chemical bottles and a bundle of roots and various leaves, along with a dozen glass perfume bottles all filled with the same colored liquid, a muddy brown color.

Huh. Salem made their own perfume!

But that wasn't the only thing they were making. Further down the stovetop Laura found a big pot that was currently empty, but on the counter beside it was a couple of laid out towels with the Spoiled Swamp logo on them. Probably used for the flume.

Laura pulled back the top layer and her eyes went wide.

Needles. Not the actual needles, but plungers and barrels all taken apart and laid out like they were drying. And right beside the big pot- was Salem... boiling needles? Why did Salem even have needles? Why did they need this many syringes? Were they doing tests, or...?

Now thoroughly curious, Laura moved to the opposite counter on the other side of the kitchen, on the other side of the island. There was a large sink that was currently empty. There was some stuff on the counter, but it didn't look too important. She looked inside of the fridge.

Jackpot!

The bottom shelf of the fridge had food in it. There were a dozen pouches of something vaguely listed as 'Salem Supper' to one side while the rest of the shelf was made up of pieces of the BIGGEST crab legs Laura had ever seen. Through the see-through

drawers she could see more roots and greens stashed in them.

But the entire top shelf and door of the fridge were stashed with bottles. There was a lot of alcohol, medical grade, not for drinking. There were bottles labelled with chemicals, some she recognized, and some didn't even sound real. Boxes of vials, numerous vials, stacked and shoved into the back. Unlabeled beakers of foggy liquid, brown bottles, white bottles, and only a single gallon jug of a liquid that almost looked like tea.

It looked like Salem was brewing something in here, but this didn't necessarily look like poison. It looked like they were making medicine... or maybe heavy drugs. Though if they had any equipment, it wasn't here-

Oh, never mind. Turns out all the equipment was hidden in the cabinets beside the fridge. Yup, either meds or drugs. Was Salem making their own medicine? To treat what? How weird...

But not helpful. Not the keycard. Laura knew her time was limited, so she reluctantly left and began to search outside of the kitchen.

A palm tree shaped neon sign illuminated the dark room in a gentle florescent light. Though it did little to help light the way as, save the section behind the counter, which was illuminated by the door into the kitchen, the rest of the diner was stacked with stuff that made it harder to see around. Including the length of the counter, which was piled up with various mechanical parts, tools, even random gears.

There was a window leading between the diner and the kitchen that was letting in a crack of light. Laura tried to lift it to no avail, and then fell back on her phone once again. She turned on its flashlight.

Well, that answered the question of where all the Salem merch went. There was tons of it in here!

There was even a cut out standee that was so tall that it caused her to jump, thinking it was the real thing. Salem plushies were stacked up on its shelves

of all shapes and sizes, and then stacked in the booths under the covered windows.

There were also other types of merch. All sorts of posters of all kinds of characters were papered to the walls. There was even a sort of mural on the stretch of wall by the front door, with a bunch of Salem posters plastered together and a spray-painted skull and cross bones over them. It really gave off the punk esthetic, or at least Laura thought so.

One of the booths looked like a would-be lounge area. The table having been moved and an odd patchwork blanket and pillows slung and sat on it respectively. A tiny heater was sitting on the floor between the booth seats.

The color scheme of those patchwork items was very familiar. It was almost like it- oh... oh.

They were made from plushies, Laura realized. Deconstructed plushies that had been harvested for

their cotton to stuff the pillows and fabric to be made into blankets and pillowcases.

That was somewhere between sad, creepy, and kinda cool. Resourceful, but a little weird.

Continuing along- over a patchwork plush rug- Laura found Salem's bed in the corner. It too was built into a booth, but she couldn't see if it was built on a lowered table or how it was made due to the plethora of blankets. Not all of these being patchwork; many of them were Salem themed blankets and bedsheets.

It was hidden under a thick curtain canopy that Laura pulled back to see the half-circle bed. It looked pretty cozy, but it smelled even more like that overwhelming perfume. And some of the patchwork pillows in the ring around the bed seemed to have plushie faces sewn on to them. Maybe as a gag, but they were creepy in the light of her phone.

Laura let the curtain fall closed and continued around the end of the counter and spotted a desk

against the wall between the bathroom doors. Or, well, a table with a couple of file cabinets shoved under it like a desk.

She began to scour the table. Laying on it was an unfinished jacket that looked to be made from pieces of recycled leather and pleather. There was also a stack of journals on one end and a couple of canisters on the back against the wall. No keycard.

She moved to the filing cabinets. One was filled with sewing supplies and the other files, folders, old newspapers- things that Laura would've wanted to sneak a peek at if she could.

And then she found them. In an old cigar box on top of the file cabinet she found some flash drives, an ancient looking floppy disc, and a stack of keycards.

“Jackpot!” she whispered. She began to look through them.

Lloyd's Main Stage Theater, Oceanic Odyssey,
Rambleberry Woods, Spoiled Swamp, East Tunnel

Access- There! Indigo Industries Labs Maintenance Access Card. Quite a mouthful but had to be the right thing!

Laura slipped it into her back pocket and put the others back and the box away. If she took them all she was sure that Salem would notice, but this way maybe they wouldn't be able to tell until long after.

Then she got up and started to hurry out of the diner as fast as she could. Only to stop on a dime beside the mountain of toys.

She looked down at the plushies doomed to become funky looking but comfy pillows and bit her lip. And after a long second of thought, she snatched one of the medium sized ones up and moved the ones around it in to hide the spot it left. Then she ran around the counter, jogged through the kitchen, and out the back door, carefully shutting it behind her.

Then Laura ran for it. Not a run-for-your-life run but the on-again-off-again run of someone trying to make it to class on time. She didn't slow down her

gait until she was leaving Spoiled Swamp and started to get winded.

Then she lifted the cell phone.

“I got it!”

“Wait, wait. You got it? You got IT?! You found it?!”

“That’s right!”

“YOU DID IT! You got the- I knew you could do it! Oh, I can’t thank you enough!” Rambley cheered.

“Hurry back here and I’ll lead you to Berryburg, then you can give it to Eddie for me!”

“Sounds like a plan!” Laura said. She continued walking a little before humming and then asking.

“So, why are you trying to get into the labs? Is there medicine in there?”

“Medicine? Huh, maybe! But actually, we’re looking for the backups of my friends! Remember when I said that I used to be an artificial intelligence in the

screens before they made my body? Well, so were my friends! I think if we can find their backups I can reupload them and bring them back to how they were before all of this happened. Maybe we can even see if they made extra bodies like mine for them! I mean, not Rambley bodies, but bodies like mine that they'll be comfortable in!"

"Ooh, okay. That makes a lot of sense," Laura said. Resisting the urge to externally gush at hearing how much he wanted his friends back. "Maybe I'll go in with you."

"I... don't know if that's a good idea... B-But you can come with! But maybe wait outside. I'm... a little afraid it might be dangerous. It's hard enough asking Eddie to go with me..."

"Ed once broke climbed an old radio tower and had to climb down with a sliced open palm. You don't have to ask him anything. If there's something dangerous, he's going to go climb it."

“...See, it’s stuff like that that makes me really nervous.”

Laura snickered a little, which Rambley joined in on-though his was a much more anxious one.

She continued ahead for a few minutes before walking back into the mall and heading towards the store that she had come in through.

“Sooo, what’s Salem’s house look like?”

“Yours.”

“Wha?- Oh, no. I didn’t mean the photoshoot location. I meant the one they’re living in, the Toxins and Tasties Snack Bar!”

“It’s just as packed as yours. They even have a curtained bed and, like, every stuffed animal Salem in the park.”

“...Oh... Huh.”

“There’s-.”

Laura cut off instantly when she noticed something. A familiar perfumy smell.

She sniffed the Salem plush and it definitely smelled of it, so maybe she had just caught a whiff of it while she was walking, but she wasn’t so sure...

“Hey, I’m going to go quiet for a second, okay?”

“Huh? Wait, are you okay? What happened?!”

“Shh.”

“Oh, right. Sorry.”

She slipped her phone into her back pocket, inadvertently covering up the keycard with it, and continued walking. Just in case, just in case.

She walked into the clothing shop and carefully stepped out the window before heading back down

the street. All the while the smell seemed to get stronger.

It wasn't until she got into the tight section that the smell finally started to fade. Maybe, she thought, she had just walked past Salem. That had been a close call then. Even a few minutes more and Salem would've caught her coming out of their house. With a sigh of relief, Laura started to jog again to the end of the alley and around the corner-

And came to a dead stop.

Because this time the life-sized Salem cutout that she walked up on wasn't a cutout.

And despite the fact that it looked like Salem- being more true-to-toon like Rambley instead of Lloyd- it caused her heart to jump into her throat. It felt like it stuck there in her windpipe.

Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God...

Salem was leering out from under their bang before cracking a smile with a humored scoff.

“Now ain’t that a familiar face...”

At first Laura thought they meant her, but then she realized they meant the plush that she was still holding. The big hunk of evidence that she had been digging around in their house. Oh God!

Salem was watching her like a hawk. She hadn’t expected them to be so intimidating- Ed said they were taller than Rambley, he didn’t say they were taller than HER!

“I’m a big- really big fan,” Laura squeaked.

“I could tell. Last I heard, you were lookin’ all over for one of those,” Salem said. They got a toothier grin, flashing a canine. “Wonder where you got that one?”

“...Oh, you know. Around! Just like...” Laura gestured vaguely behind her. “Around.”

“Around my swamp?”

“...Yes.”

The skunk chuckled and sauntered closer. Each step a slow sway, almost taunting Laura, closing the distance until they were in arm's length. They planted their hands on their hips, sizing Laura up.

“Don't I know ya somewhere?”

“I'm-.”

“That's right!” Salem said with a snap of their fingers. “You're friends with Furrball's special buddy, ain'tcha?”

“Suuure,” Laura stretched out unsurely.

“You threw that party at my park.”

“Well... Yeah.”

“Got a lot of guts doing that.”

“Hey, I didn’t even know Rambley was real! I just thought the place was abandoned!”

That got a wicked laugh out of the skunk and a shake of their head. Laura matched with a semi-forced smile.

Salem silently looked her over again. Something concocting behind that singular eye. They were plotting something. The other eye was entirely covered, only making Laura more curious to what was hiding beneath that bang.

“Whatcha so nervous about?” Salem asked, voice considerably lower.

Laura scrambled, trying to somehow turn this into a normal conversation.

“Oh, just, you know, taking this- I didn’t think you’d notice. Not that I planned on stealing from you! I was sort of hoping the gift shop would have them, but

there wasn't any and then I just wound up in your house."

She realized a moment too late that this whole story relied on the fact that the gift shop didn't have plushies in it, but she hadn't even checked. So, she held that smile and waited for a reaction.

Salem continued silently judging her.

And then began to grin again.

"Tell ya what. I'm in a good mood today. I'm gonna let you keep that... Under one condition."

"Really? Thanks! And sure, just name it."

"I don't catch you sneaking around my swamp again," they said lowly, almost through their teeth.

"Sure!" Laura agreed.

Salem started to walk past, only to lean in and tack on an unexpected-

“Unless I’m there.”

Laura was struck dumb and Salem strode off with the biggest smirk on their face and zero idea that there was a keycard stashed in her back pocket.

After a few seconds, Laura began to continue speedily walking back towards Main Street. Waiting until she was sure that she had lost the skunk before getting her phone back out.

“I-I just ran into Salem! They were RIGHT HERE!” she whispered.

“Oh no, I was worried that’s what happened... Are you okay? If they so much as touched one hair on your head or put one drop of blue on you, I’ll-!”

“No, I’m fine! They didn’t do anything, but they- it’s-!” Laura sputtered. She took a deep breath. “I’ll tell you later, but I’m okay.”

“That’s good- No, that’s great! Let me just find you on the cameras. I’ll feel a lot better once I’ve got my eye on you.”

Laura would too, probably, maybe.

But she had a feeling this wasn’t the last time she was going to see Salem.

She was too curious to let that mystery walk away without some answers. A huge weight was taken off Ed’s shoulders when Laura came jogging up. He knew she must’ve gotten to Spoiled Swamp too considering that she was toting a Salem plush.

Katie greeted her with a hug and questions, and Laura brushed it off as nothing. Just a long conversation with her mom. The plush? She found it on the way here in a diner. It was the only one though. Nobody pressed.

Though a little afterwards, Laura discreetly slipped Ed a square piece of plastic and he realized it was

the keycard. He stole a look at it while the others weren't watching.

Indigo Industries, huh? He hadn't heard anything about that in his research of the park. That didn't exactly bode well.

But that didn't matter. They had their ticket into the labs, now it was just a matter of finishing this visit without any incidents.

To keep things from looking too suspicious, they walked around a little more before heading back towards Main Street, with the goal of heading for Rambley's Railroad- specifically, the gift shop. Nobody was against this plan.

Though one of them wanted to add to it, eyeing the Main Stage Theater as they passed by the fountain.

"Can we check out the theater?" Leo asked.

"Uh... I don't know. I don't think we should. It's really falling apart in there," Ed said.

“Whoa, wait. You’re turning down a place because it’s falling apart?” Daryl asked in exaggerated disbelief. “What happened? Did you miss your tetanus shot?”

“Hey, it’s one thing if I risk breaking my own legs. Risking you guys breaking yours? No way. It takes all the fun out of it.”

Nobody argued. Not even Leo, who was pretty disappointed.

He got it, it was dangerous. If anyone, Ed would know what he was talking about. Still didn’t make it any less disappointing.

That theater was the one thing he really wanted to see again. It was his favorite place in the park, and the one place his parents enjoyed on their visit. They had thought that the mascot looked so lifelike and that the music was good, though it was spectacular to Leo. Everything else was just a cheap kiddie park,

but when they looked up on that stage for a while they were all on the same page.

But this wasn't about watching the shows. Leo could find pieces of them online if he was that desperate. This was about seeing that theater again.

Leo tended to be on the quiet side despite his current choice in headgear. If he stepped away, odds are they wouldn't notice immediately. So, as the others got distracted in Steam & Steel Souvenirs, Leo slowly separated himself from the group. And once Ed wasn't paying attention- Daryl was trying to squeeze into a way too small shirt and Ed was nearly wheezing- Leo stepped out the door.

Then he quickly made his way towards the theater. He'd be quick. He'd just step inside, look around, and leave.

He walked up to the front doors and tried them and was surprised to find that they were totally unlocked. He didn't even need to use his Critter Cuff.

Of course, he had no way of knowing that it was because something had broken the locks not too long ago.

He opened the doors and stepped into the theater, illuminated only by the spotlight shining down on the stage. The once regal-looking theater had degraded from years of weathering, but he was surprised to see how much was still standing up. Such as the rows of ruby red seats, many of them still looking marginally clean.

He remembered sitting up on a balcony, though now he couldn't tell which one. It was like he was on the top of the world watching a real-life cartoon character sing and perform.

He had been so young that he was sure that Lloyd was real and wanted to meet him, but they didn't get to. Once those big curtains drew shut, everyone filed out and the show was over.

Now he was insanely curious about what could lie beyond those curtains.

He walked up to the stage and then up onto the steps, hearing the wood creak beneath him. Any sign of mushy floorboards and he'd turn back, but in this case, he took the creak as a sort of assurance.

Or he just really didn't want to turn back yet.

Though he did turn back to get a look from the stage. Looking over the many seats and balconies. From this angle it wasn't anywhere near as majestic, but he soaked it in before turning around and continuing backstage.

He didn't remember seeing any of this stuff before. There was a second curtain behind Lloyd, right? He remembered there was a background curtain that would change out for different moments, but no trace of it now. It could've been removed. It looked like there was plenty of stuff shoved back here, and probably through the ominous door at the back of the room.

That door was calling him.

Until the screen above him suddenly alit and someone else was calling.

“Hold up! What are you doing here?!”

It was Rambley, and he looked just as shocked as Leo was to see him.

“Just looking around,” Leo said with an attempted casual shrug. “I haven’t been here since I was a kid and just wanted to see if it was still standing. Look at all the, uh.” He snapped his fingers twice. “Space you’ve got back here.”

“...I guess it is! It’s a pretty big stage for one guy to fill. Thankfully Lloyd wasn’t exactly small... Well, you got a look! Now it’s time to head back to the group!” Rambley chirped, pointing his thumbs to the right of the screen with a big smile and obvious sweat drops.

Normally Leo would’ve listened, he really would’ve. He had always been obedient. Never got in trouble

in school or, well, anywhere. Coming to Indigo Park was really the riskiest thing he had ever done.

Maybe he felt so bold because he had part of his suit on. Or maybe because he was so close that he couldn't stop now. This was his second chance. He was already inside! How could he let that go?

"I will, but let me just... Let me just take a quick peek," Leo said, raising a finger. "One quick peek."

"Huh?"

"I'll be right back," Leo said. He started to scoot to the side, creeping away from the screen.

"What?! Wait! Stop! It's not safe back there!"

Rambley cried. Leo turned his head back- or the big plush Lloyd head covering his head. "Th-There's, umm. There hasn't been proper maintenance in a long time. Water damage everywhere, the floorboards are soft, you might literally break a leg!"

“I know. Don’t worry, I’m going to be extra careful and if anything happens, I’m not going to sue. I’d probably get myself thrown in jail if I told the cops I broke my leg sneaking around in here. I’ll be careful.”

This was bad. Lloyd was probably back there somewhere!

So, he was afraid of the police, eh?”

“Sorry to burst your bubble, but if you do this, then I’ll have no choice but to arrest you myself. Company policy!” Rambley said. He crossed his arms with a serious look.

“...Aren’t you a security guard?”

“Yes, I am!”

“ ... ”

Leo stared at that scene before looking back at the door, thinking about how far the security office had to be...

“...I’m going to take my chances.”

“What?”

Leo ran into the back of the theater and through the door. “I’m sorry! I’ll be right back!” he yelled back as he did.

“NO! WAIT! STOP!” Rambley cried after him. To no avail, to no surprise. “Ugh.” He slouched on the screen, realizing this was about to become a huge deal. “No wonder he likes Lloyd so much...”

It wasn’t long before Leo stumbled to a stop into an enormous storage room. There were at least a dozen shelves messily angled throughout the room. The whole warehouse was crowded and cluttered. Considering Rambley’s warning, Leo didn’t really feel like risking it squeezing around in that.

Actually, he was sort of disappointed. He was hoping the backstage meet and greet would be here. It had to be! So, where was it? He knew it existed because Lloyd himself advertised it in the show. They sold tickets to it!

There was a passageway to the right that led into darkness. It looked like it had been blocked at one point but the stuff in the way had been forced away.

Maybe down there?

He started to head into the hallway, stepping around the large equipment chest and climbing over a shelf. It was getting darker. He could use his phone as a light, but...

He pulled off the Lloyd head. Pushing back his dark, somewhat sweaty hair out of his eyes, he peered through the darkness. It definitely helped to take it off, but he was still going to need some help.

He got out his phone, turned on the flashlight, and shined it into the darkness. It looked like there was

an open shutter door at the end of the hallway. He pressed on, climbing over stage supplies as he did.

Leo was not the type of person to risk his skin for anything. Maybe that was why only time he was able to cut loose was when he was so covered up in fur that nobody could see it. He would love to say that Indigo Park led to this discovery, but Indigo Park was something he forgot all about for years and came back to due to Lloyd the Lion, one of the staples of his childhood.

In a way, that singular visit to the park had really been a game changer. But it was pretty much the only time high grades got him a reward of that magnitude. After that point, they just sort of became expected.

He always said things would change once he moved out, but they really didn't.

And that made him want to go further.

Soon he arrived at some stairs. There was a musty smell coming up from the lower floor and the air had gotten a touch staler with it. There was probably stagnant water down there, but by now he reached tiles that felt secure and a flight of stairs that looked stable, so he continued down them.

There was something flashing ahead. He saw the reflection off the walls before he saw the source, and it was surprising.

There was an arcade cabinet at the end of the hallway. It was on with the screen somewhat flickering but showing a clear picture- odd that it was plugged in in the hallway, backed up against a heavily reinforced door. One that looked more appropriate for an army base than an amusement park. Looks like that was the end of the road.

Though there were two more doors between him and the cabinet. On the left was a large door that looked like it was for a garage, which was lifted about halfway. On the right side, closer, was a normal door.

Leo tried that door first. Locked, no good. With the keypad beside it he wasn't shocked. So, he kept to the garage door and crouched down to look inside. The funky smell only intensified, to the point that he snorted and choked on it.

There was a twisting feeling in his stomach as he smelled that. He suddenly had a bad feeling about looking, but he couldn't help himself.

He slowly leaned down and peeked under the edge of the garage door, shining his phone light inside.

He didn't expect to see a cage taking up half of the room. The door sat open.

He didn't expect to see random colorful feathers that looked like they must've come off a costume or a headdress.

But above all, he didn't expect to see the faint dried brown drag marks on the concrete floor. Because that looked a whole lot like blood.

Leo shot upright and stood there wide-eyed for a long minute or so. He needed to leave, he knew that, and yet disbelief had him bending back over and looking inside.

This time he took a better look. The cage was huge, too big for any animal he could consider. Not big enough for something like an elephant, not that he recalled them having elephants in the park. Just a big cage with some torn up stuff in the bottom of it, but the ridge on the base of the cage was too high for him to see well.

Those were drag marks on the floor though. Maybe not blood. It was brownish, which old blood would be, but... could've been mud. Dirt. There wasn't a whole lot of it. Just some directly outside of the cage.

Being dragged towards the cage.

Towards a bunch of colorful feathers that couldn't be from a bird. They were too big... weren't they?

And suddenly he noticed the sound of something directly behind him. Leo hit his head on the garage door spinning around and found that right behind was standing-

Ed.

Leo plopped down on his backside with an exhale of relief.

“Jeez, man! Where’d you come from?” he asked.

“Shh,” Ed shushed. Much to Leo’s confusion. He pointed to the door. “Did you see something?”

“Yeah, come look at this,” Leo said.

Ed crouched down beside him and cautiously shined his flashlight inside, and his eyes widened immediately.

That was Lloyd’s cage, he realized. Just like the cage he saw in the game and the ones Rambley had

mentioned. It had been down here the whole time- and apparently that wasn't the only thing.

He recognized the feathers as being Mollie Macaw's. This was where the mascot's body had been taken, he even saw some remains of blood. Yet nowhere else. It had to have been cleaned up, but by who?

Lloyd couldn't have reached that body on his own, but from the looks of things- he lifted his head to look further in the back at a white thing poking up and realized it was a bone and lowered his head- he was the one who got rid of it.

"That's what happened to her..."

"I don't remember there being animals in the park," Leo said quietly.

"...There was a petting zoo," Ed offered.

"With animals this big?!" Leo whispered, dramatically swinging an arm towards the cage. Only to quickly recoil it.

Ed felt the same way. “Let’s get out of here.”

Leo nodded and they both stood back up. Only then did Ed look back down the hall at the arcade cabinet. He had noticed it coming down the stairs but had been too afraid that Leo had found Lloyd to pay much attention. Now though he was curious. He looked back towards the stairs, considered his options, and then began to walk over.

“One second.”

“What?” Leo noticed where he was going. “Oh, that. Yeah, I thought it was kind of weird that it was down here.”

“I’d bet it’s not supposed to be... Did the theater have a gift shop around back or something?”

“No. I don’t know. Maybe. I don’t think so.”

It looked almost like the cabinet was being moved when someone decided to just randomly stop and

plug it in. Or, maybe, they couldn't get through the heavy door leading into the tunnels and just decided this was as good enough spot as any. Though taking it down a flight of stairs just to leave it in a hallway was awfully weird.

Instead of saying 'Rambley's Rush', the cabinet was instead labelled with the name 'King of the Big Top'. But it was clearly another Rambley game as he was on the side of the cabinet. He was balancing on a striped ball winking while behind him was Lloyd posed with a microphone as though mid-song. It looked more like it belonged in the circus district than the theater though.

But by all accounts, it looked close to the Rambley Rush cabinets he had already seen. Maybe it would hold the same secrets?

"Watch my back?" Ed asked.

Leo held out his hand. Getting the gist, Ed handed off his flashlight and reached into his pocket, only to remember that he didn't have his phone.

“Can I borrow your phone?”

“For- Sure. Hold on a second.”

He handed it over, expecting Ed to use it as a sort of light, but he was asked to unlock it. He quirked a brow and did, and then handed it over. Ed poked around a bit before opening the voice memos, the voice recorder. He started a recording before setting it down between the buttons on the console.

“...You know, you don’t have to record every game you play,” Leo said with mild amusement.

“Just in case something interesting happens,” Ed said with a smile. In reality, that wasn’t a lie. This time he wasn’t going to miss it.

He started up the game. Thankfully, like the others he had encountered, this one was stuck on a free play mode. So, it started up just as easily.

It opened into a circus tent. Rambley was standing in the center on a small round stage, with Lloyd standing off to the right. One arm gestured out towards Rambley and a mic in the other.

“And in the center ring we have RRRRRAMBLEY!” Lloyd announced in his text. “Well, Rambley. If you want to be the King of the Big Top then you will have to hop to the top without falling! Can you do it?”

“Of course I am! I’m part kangaroo on my great-great-great grandmother’s side,” Rambley said. “Watch and learn, Lloyd!”

Then the level started, but instead of being a classic level it was a vertical based one. Two platforms lowered and Ed made Rambley jump onto one, which lifted him to more platforms, and then tight ropes that could be bounced on. Soon enough, enemies appeared into the fold as well. First little birds and then bouncing balls that injured Rambley when he touched them.

The climb continued up and up all while bouncy circus music played. There were even collectables in the form of balloons, which added to a growing score count in the upper left of the screen replacing the collectable number.

Leo looked back uneasily when he thought he heard something upstairs. He shined the light and watched, but he heard nothing more.

“I’m starting to get creeped out... Maybe we should take off,” he said.

“We will. Let me just get to the end.”

“Does it end? It could be one of those endless climber ones.”

Honestly, it could have been, but Ed needed to make sure. So, he kept going, and going, up and up into the giant circus tent.

But then he finally reached a tightrope that looked a little different. It was thicker and stretched the entire

length of the screen, and he could see there wasn't anything above it. He jumped up onto it.

Sure enough, the music changed to a familiar funky tune and suddenly Salem did a flip through the air and landed on a small platform that looked to be part of the background.

"Look who finally showed up! You took your sweet time."

"Salem?!?! What are you doing up here?!"

"Waiting to challenge the King of the Big Top. Looks like instead I just got a circus clown." Salem paused to give a trademark laugh. "Well, if you're looking to get crowned then you better get in line. The three of us beat you here by a mile, Slowpoke!"

"Wait, three of you?"

"That's right! Howzabout you three get acquainted? I've got places I've gotta be."

Salem jumped off the platform and off screen, and as they did, two new characters leapt in from either side of the screen. They were monkeys wearing checkerboard bodysuits, one red and green, the other yellow and blue. And without a word, or text, from either of them, the boss battle began.

Ed had to make Rambley hop around while avoiding the monkeys who took turns jumping around and throwing juggling balls across the tightrope. Then he had to jump on their heads one at a time to do damage.

Eventually one of the monkeys, the yellow and blue one, hopped off screen. The other one joined after he jumped on its head a few more times. Rambley automatically walked into the center of the tightrope and turned right and left.

“I guess they’re gone...”

When suddenly the tightrope fell. Rambley stayed in the air a second longer before falling

“AHHHHHHH!”

After a short fall compared to the climb up, Rambley landed on top of none other than Lloyd who was standing on the center pedestal. He had his arm lifted up, and Rambley bounced and jumped off of him and back onto the floor.

“TA DA!” Lloyd said.

“Thank you for catching me, Lloyd. I thought I was a goner!”

“It was no trouble for the proud and prestigious Lloydford L. Lion! And besides, I would do a/n—y/t/h—i—n/g—f/ō/r>y<ō—u.”

The scene flickered with lines of static that rolled up and distorted the image, and Ed barely caught some of the slowly typing text on the bottom of the screen.

Through the crackles of the speaker, barely audible, Ed heard a familiar voice but something sounded

very wrong. He had to throw himself forward to hear the low and hoarse voice as it said:

“I hate you.”

There was no denying it this time. That was Rambley’s voice. It had that same dangerously low tone he had when he blew up over that Retro Lloyd plush.

Something about it made Ed very uneasy.

“That was some very creepy timing for that to short out,” Leo said.

“Yeah...” Ed agreed. He ended the recording on the phone. “I’m getting pretty creeped out myself.”

“Join the club. So, can we-?”

CLUNK

Both jumped and looked down at the front of the cabinet. Ed hadn’t paid much mind to the lower half,

but now he noticed it had an opening like a vending machine. He leaned down and reached inside and pulled out some kind of cassette tape. It wasn't like a music tape and was too small to be a VCR tape, both of which he didn't have the means to play anyways. It was very weird.

The tape was unlabeled too. He turned it over in his hands, looked at Leo, shrugged, and then put it in his backpack.

"That's... very weird. What kind of tape is that?" Leo said.

Ed shrugged again.

"Good answer. Anyways, I think we should go. Phone?"

"Sure, sorry. Can you send me the recording?" Ed asked as he handed it over.

"Are you going to decipher whatever that was?"

“We’ll see.”

Seemed simple enough. Leo sent it to his phone as they started heading down the hall. Though he noticed when Ed didn’t get any notification. It said he had only a bar of service, so it was probably that.

“You might not get it until we’re outside,” he said.

It suddenly dawned on Ed that Rambley might get it. He really hoped he didn’t.

They climbed the stairs, over the stuff blocking them, and started to head towards the still open warehouse door- Lloyd must’ve dinged it up somehow because it wasn’t automatically shutting anymore- when Leo caught his shoulder.

“Wait, wait!” he whispered. “We’ve got a problem. Your friend saw me, and I think he’s going to call the cops.”

“Rambley? Don’t worry about it. He was just...”

Ed turned back towards Leo and his heart stopped.

Because right past him, right there peeking over the platform and through the railing, was Lloyd. He was standing behind some of the stacked black equipment chests so they couldn't see him coming through the door.

There were more smears and stains on his face. No doubt the remains of Mollie stuck in his fur, the knowledge of which suddenly made Ed very sick.

This was very, very bad.

He didn't know what to do. He didn't know how to signal Leo or whether to make a run for it- likely that would trigger Lloyd to chase them. The Critter Cuff might hold him back, unless his bloodlust was too great, but even in the best scenario there was no two ways about it, Leo was going to see him.

But currently, all Leo saw was Ed suddenly looking very nervous, and looking at something behind him.

“What are you looking at...?” Leo asked quietly.

“...Nothing. Just, umm... No, wait.” He stopped Leo when he slowly started to turn his head. He quickly faced Ed again. “I just... wanted to say that we’re safe here. Really. Because we have...”

Ed held up his Critter Cuff towards Lloyd while looking Leo in the eyes.

“This. And as long as we have this. We’re, uh, good to go.”

Leo gave him a confused look, but Lloyd must’ve gotten the message. Or at least, seeing the Critter Cuff reminded him of what happened last time he got too close.

He began to slink back off the crates. Leo went rigid, wide-eyed as he heard the sound of something huge scuffling nearby behind him. Its heavy footsteps being a dead giveaway to its sheer size. He stood frozen in place, staring at Ed who stared back and occasionally looked off to the side- off towards Lloyd,

who slinked back into the shelves, sliding some stuff aside as he did.

But then they were alone. Ed dropped his arm to his side and opened his mouth to speak.

But then Lloyd must've knocked something over as an almighty crash came from the warehouse proper. In that second, Leo suddenly bolted past and started running down the hall into the theater. Despite his earlier fear of being chased, Ed was quick on his heels.

As they passed through the backstage area, Rambley popped up on the screen.

“Hey, you found him! Good work, Bud- huh?! Why are you running?! Are- oh, uhm, uh, go for it!”
Rambley's worried face stayed on the screen as he continued checking to see if Lloyd was following, but he wasn't.

Ed and Leo still bolted out of the theater like he was though. Then Ed turned around and made an effort

to shut the doors, trying to use the Critter Cuff to relock them to no avail.

All while Leo was trying to catch his breath on the steps. As soon as Ed turned towards him, he pointed at the door.

“What was in there?!”

“It wasn’t... It’s sort of like...” Ed gave a patient exhale. “There’s wild animals running around.”

“What do you mean, wild animals?!”

Ed gestured for him to lower his voice. “Like, animals they used to use in the performances at the park. Some of them are still running around.”

“You mean like the mascots?”

Ed’s mouth snapped shut.

“Not the- I don’t mean the animatronics. I mean like-like they had animal mascots too? Because that

cage down there could've been big enough for a lion, but I don't get why it would be in a basement unless it was like a holding cell? Wait, hold on, hold up, why didn't you say something?!"

"It's a long story, but I meant what I said. These Critter Cuffs have some sort of built-in sound deterrent and when the animals get too close it drives them off. It just didn't get close enough to set it off."

Leo studied his face for a long moment, processing this, and then looked down at his own cuff.

"They can do that?"

"They can. I got cornered by a big dog and it scared it off."

"There's dogs here too?" Leo asked in aghast. "Why are you spending so much time here if there's wild dogs and circus animals- Is it because of that guy who works here?"

“Yup.”

“Oookay. I’m up to speed,” Leo said with a sigh. He looked at the cuff again. “...Do these really work? I’ve heard of those bug repellent plugins that use sound to keep them from coming inside. They don’t really work.”

“These do.”

“...Well, you’re the one who’s been hanging around, so I guess I trust you. But do me a solid and next time, tell me about the wild animals before I do something stupid,” Leo said.

“I will, I promise. Just...” Ed looked back towards the gift shop. Nobody had come out yet. He lowered his voice, “You can’t tell anyone about else. Please, Leo. This can’t get out.”

“To the others?” Leo pointed towards the gift shop.

“I... don’t know. I meant out-out. If this got online you know there’d be people racing over here to try and

get pictures and it would be very dangerous. And not just for them, but for the animals. Just... Keep this between us?"

Leo was a little surprised at Ed's near-pleading at this point, but he gave him a forced smile.

"Who am I going to tell?" he agreed.

Ed smiled too. "Thanks, Leo. I owe you."

"Yes, you do. But we'll figure that out some other time. Let's get away from these doors."

"Right."

Ed threw an arm around Leo and they started walking back to the gift shop, which he returned halfway there.

"Don't tell Katie. She'll freak," Leo warned as they started up the steps.

"I won't."

It wasn't until they were about to walk into the Steam & Steel when Leo suddenly got a horrible idea. He stopped and yanked Ed back right before he could walk in, and he turned his head to see Leo with wide eyes matching when Lloyd was creeping around behind him. His voice as low as it could get.

"You don't think Russ...?"

Now Ed's eyes went wide. "No! No. Couldn't be. I ran him out of here at the party. He left," he quickly denied.

"Good," Leo said, relieved. "...I don't think he was wearing a bunch of bird feathers anyway. Must've been like a... peacock?" Ed nodded along with this. "Could be!"

It was at this point when Ed and Leo both became aware that they were purposefully grasping at straws to not even consider a more horrifying idea. But it worked for them both.

It worked so well that they headed inside without any desire to run questions about the feathers or Russ with any of the others.

The rest of their friends noticed when they returned and were prepared to ask, but quickly got distracted when they noticed something else.

“Gasp!” Daryl shouted. He pointed at the Lloyd head still clutched by Leo’s arm. “The beast has been beheaded! The king is dead, long live the king!”

“Hear ye, hear ye!” Laura played along.

“And I’m the weird one,” Leo retorted.

“You brought a Lloyd the Lion head and wore it the whole time we walked around. You are the weird one,” Daryl said.

“Where’ve you been?” Katie asked.

“Just uh-.” Leo gestured back.

“Outside,” Ed added.

“Looking at the fountain,” Leo finished.

Daryl gave a funny look at that clearly suspicious explanation.

“Come over here and look at thiiiiis!” Katie nearly squealed. She held up a Conductor Rambley plush. “Train Engineer Rambley! He’s so cute~!”

“I know, right? You should see him on the train,” Ed said, stepping up and off the hook, as Daryl wouldn’t be keen on badgering for answers when Katie was chatting. That was, hopefully, it. For now.

And it was for a little while, until Laura handed him her phone. He raised a brow but she simply pointed at the screen. He looked to see a short text message exchange.

L: They got back.

E: Good!

E: Give the phone to Eddie, please?

L: *thumbs up*

E: Eddie, it's me! *Raccoon Emoji* Meet me at the screen in the tunnel!

Ed started to type back 'ok', when another message popped up.

E: That's the tunnel beside Rambley Railroad and come alone!

Ed smiled and sent the 'ok' before handing Laura back her phone.

"Guys, I'm going to step out for a second."

Daryl looked over immediately, suspiciously.

"Again?"

"Yeah, I'm just going to get some air."

“He’s going to go say hi to the security guard,” Laura covered for him.

“...Okay, yeah. That’s what I’m doing.”

Daryl was still giving him a funny look but at least seemed to buy it- though technically it was the truth.

“Watch out for dogs,” Leo half-joked.

“Dogs?” Katie asked.

“There’s wild dogs around here somewhere.”

“Wild dogs?! Do they bite?!”

Ed slipped out of the gift shop while Leo attempted to dig himself out of the hole he put himself in.

It didn’t take him long to make it into the tunnel, making sure that Daryl hadn’t gotten the wild idea to follow him before heading in and up to the screen. The screen popped on, revealing Rambley.

“There you are, Buddy! Just in time!” Rambley chirped.

“Came as fast as I could.”

“I’ll say! Seeing you blow by in the theater had me a little worried.” He looked aside and tapped his fingers nervously. “Speaking of which... didheseelloyd?”

“He didn’t see him...”

“Whew! That’s a relief!... Wait a second, why did you emphasize ‘see’,” Rambley asked, squinting.

“He heard him. And I don’t mean like he heard him across the room. Lloyd was waiting for us when we came up from the basement.”

“Wait, wait, how’d you get into the basement?!” Rambley cried. He started looking even more panicked. “Did you see anything?! What was down there?!”

“Calm down, Buddy. It’s okay. We didn’t see much,” Ed assured him.

Rambley took a deep breath. “And where was Lloyd?”

“Waiting up in the warehouse.” Rambley winced. “But I was the only one who saw him. And I sort of, flashed the Critter Cuff and it got him to run off.”

“Thank Indigo he left. With the cameras back there being how they are, I wouldn’t have been able to...” He got a look of dread for a quiet second before shaking his head. “But that’s not worth worrying about now. We’ve got bigger problems now that he knows about Lloyd.”

“He doesn’t. I just said there’s wild animals running around. Like, circus animals. He doesn’t know what’s actually going on,” Ed said.

Rambley sighed in relief. “Good. That’s not too far from the truth either, and at least it’s better than a whole bunch of snakes! Not much better, but a little.”

It had worked out, but Ed was starting to second-guess the halfway honesty. Leo had a point about hiding this and then bringing his friends around. Even if it was a one-time thing, Leo could've gotten killed.

"...Maybe I should tell him? The whole truth, like Laura," he asked.

"Are you kidding? Someone who's that big of a fan of Lloyd? No way! He might try to sneak back there again," Rambley joked.

"I don't think he's going back in there after that. And he already said he wouldn't tell anyone."

"Hold up. Let's just... think about this for a while, okay? We'll sleep on it, run it back, and then... maybe," Rambley said. He clasped his hands together pleadingly with a desperate grin. Then he suddenly cringed and looked down at his hands. "Ugh. I've gotta go take a shower."

“What happened?”

“I’ll tell you later,” he sighed. “Just don’t say anything, please.”

“I won’t, but I trust Leo.”

“He seems like a little bit of a wild card to me,”
Rambley mumbled.

“More than me?”

“Hmm... I’ll have to think about it,” he said with a little smile. “By the way, he sent you a message a while ago. I didn’t snoop but I was awfully tempted.”

Ed tried to not look too relieved.

“Thanks. I’ll check it later.”

“Then I’ll let you get back to our guests! Erm, I might be off the system for a little while, so if you could do me a favor and keep an eye on things, I’d really appreciate it.”

“Leave it to me.”

Rambley got his trademark grin. “Make me proud, Rangler!” he chirped. Then the screen went dark once more.

Ed was almost relieved when the conversation ended without having to bring up the cage they found. That was going to be a tough talk, but they would cross that bridge later. For now, he rushed back to the others to finish up the visit and hopefully get them on their way out of the park.

All the while that keycard weighed in his pocket like a rock. Reminding him he would have his answers soon enough. Though if today was any indication, maybe there were some questions he would’ve preferred not knowing the answer to... Rambley had been awfully quiet after his and Ed’s conversation. At first, he didn’t think much of it since Rambley had to apparently take an impromptu shower, but by time Ed was walking his friends out the front gate and the

raccoon hadn't popped up to say goodbye on any of the screens? Oh yeah, something was up.

But with everyone leaving, and not aware that Ed was sticking around, this freed him up to go check on him and see what was going on. That, and make sure Salem wasn't up to anything, which the prolonged silence was making him increasingly more nervous about.

After all, Salem hadn't waited too long after the last party to swoop in and swipe his little buddy. Ed hurried back to the tree to make sure he was there.

He was concerned when he found the door unlocked and no Rambley to be seen, but upon heading inside he noticed two sounds: water running, and low muttering. And they were coming from the bathroom door.

Ed walked over and knocked lightly.

"...Eddie?" Rambley called out.

“It’s just me!”

“Oh, thank goodness! You had me worried for a second.”

Ed could hear running water getting sloshed around.

“What happened?” he asked.

“You’re not even going to BELIEVE what happened to me! You can come in,” Rambley said. He gave a defeated sigh. “You’re going to see it anyways...”

Ed opened the door and peeked in. “See what-whoa!”

He wasn’t expecting so much blue. Big stains of blue both on Rambley and on the floor. And Rambley sitting crossed legged in his shower working at his tail with a brush and an entire bottle of some sort of shampoo.

Oh, this had to be a Salem thing. That much bright blue didn't naturally appear in nature. Unless he walked into a Raspberry Bird-Up machine.

Ed stepped in and closed the door behind him.

"Why're you blue?" he asked, trying to withhold a snicker.

"Ask Salem the Rotten Skunk," Rambley grumbled. His cheeks puffing in frustration just thinking of them smirking at him.

"Need a hand?" Ed offered.

"No, you don't have to... Well... If you don't mind, would you mind starting on my suit? I really don't want to let that stuff dry, but I've got to focus on myself first and foremost." He pointed towards the sink.

"No problem. Leave it to me!" Ed agreed. He found the suit balled up in the sink, a far cry from how

careful Rambley usually was. He picked it up, noticing the smell. “So, what is this stuff?”

“Whatever was sitting at the bottom of the Port-O-John,” Rambley said bitterly, bobbing his head back and forth like he was mocking Salem.

Ed promptly dropped the suit and threw his hands up. The suit landed on the floor with a wet splat. He looked at Rambley who gave him an apologetic smile.

“I probably should’ve started with: the gloves are under the sink,” he said sheepishly.

Ed looked Rambley over again and noticed how much blue had gotten on him in a new light.

“Oh Buddy, I’m so sorry,” he said sympathetically.

Rambley’s face heated up in embarrassment at that shift to sympathy.

“I-It’s not that bad! Ha... Is it?” he squeaked.

“It’s nothing a little brushing and soap won’t fix.”

Ed looked down at the suit before kneeling and going under the sink, sorting through the stuff underneath. There were gloves, brushes, something like dish soap; all the sorts of stuff he would need. But what he immediately noticed was a bottle of Indigo Park brand bleach.

Huh. Why- On second thought, Ed would prefer not knowing why they needed their own bleach. There was some old baking powder too. Maybe that would work better? Were you supposed to mix those or not?

“Does the suit have to stay green?” he asked over his shoulder.

“It certainly isn’t going to stay green now thanks to Salem,” Rambley huffed. “I suppose not. I don’t use an actual greenscreen, just the sensors. Why?”

“Because there’s some bleach down here. It might be worth just soaking the whole thing to make sure all of the, uh, stuff’s cleaned off. Might turn it white. Ish.”

Rambley hummed with a tight frown. He really didn’t want to bleach his pretty green suit into a splotchy mess, but at this point with all this gunk on it- and if it was the only way to get the smell out-

“I suppose green with white spots wouldn’t be any worse than green with blue. It shouldn’t affect the sensors; I already removed them if you’ve noticed.”

“I did. I didn’t know they came off.”

“Well, they’re not technically supposed to, but it’ll be our little secret.”

With that go-ahead, Ed plugged the sink and made a mix of water and bleach- deciding to forgo the baking powder since he couldn’t remember if it was dangerous or not. He carefully submerged the suit into the concoction, hoping that if he did, and if it did

bleach it, maybe it would at least come out somewhat evenly.

But after finding out what was on it, it was worth the sacrifice.

As he was putting stuff away, he noticed the leftover baking powder.

“Hey, you know. This might work on you,” Ed said.
“Might help take the blue out.”

Rambley clutched his tail protectively. “I don’t think so, Buddy! I’m not burning my fur off- it might not grow back!”

Ed got an amused smile and held up the baking soda box. “This.”

“Oh... Oh, that might work! Works on teeth. Bring it here!”

Ed brought him over the box and sat down outside of the shower, unconcerned if he got a little splashed

by the water. Even if it was freezing cold. He was surprised Rambley could tolerate it, but he guessed between the gunk and the cold the answer was clear.

Rambley looked at the baking soda and then the bottle of soap with a scrutinizing look and a hum until he deemed them safe to use together, then carefully added the smallest bit to the brush he was using on his tail.

He was diligent as he worked. Carefully switching between scrubbing and gently combing his fur and checking with scrutiny to make sure it was both cleaned and undamaged. Picking through every tuft.

“How’d it happen?” Ed dared to ask.

“I was taking cover in a slide and they tossed it down on me.”

“Ouch.”

“Lemme tell ya, Salem’s lucky. If I wasn’t stuck-stuck hiding in that slide, oh ho ho, I would’ve yanked that suit right off and slapped it right over their smug mug!” Rambley said, wagging the brush in his hand. He then began to scrub at his fur again. “Better not show their face again tonight,” he muttered.

It was clear that he was more upset than he was letting on. Ed could imagine each smile being a little forced. He thought of a way to lighten the mood.

“I’ve got a funny Port-O-John story.”

Rambley got a befuddled look. Then a goofy smile. “Lay it on me!”

“When I was a kid, I went on this road trip with my parents and my mom spotted this flea market on the side of the road and she wanted to go. Dad didn’t, because he thinks they’re dirty and cheap, whatever, but Mom won out. So, we head inside and start walking around. A little while later we pass by this group of Port-O-Johns and Mom asked if I needed to

go, and I did. So, I went inside and it's like someone dropped a pipe bomb in there. There's "stuff" everywhere, there's big hunks of wet toilet paper stuck to the walls, there's all this- you get it. And I look down, and on the toilet lid someone had written in their own diarrhea- at least I hope it was their own- they wrote across the lid: Buttjuice. You might think I'm exaggerating-."

Rambley dry-heaved.

"...On second thought, maybe this isn't the best time for this story."

He nodded with a queasy look.

They returned to silence and Rambley to his scrubbing. Still looking just a little squirmy, though that could be because he was starting to shiver.

"I'm almost done," he eventually spoke up. "Do me a favor and put some water on for the rations?"

"Trying to get rid of me?" Ed joked as he got up.

“Get rid of my best buddy? No way! If I wanted to do that, I would’ve asked you to scrub me,” Rambley said with a playful smile. He held up the brush and shook it. “But the offer’s still open if you insist!”

“Alright, alright. I’m drawing the line and closing the door.”

“Your loss.”

Ed let Rambley finish up in peace and went to get the water on. Which didn’t take long at all, and soon the kettle was sitting on the hot plate waiting to boil. Knowing it would take a while to heat- the hot plate was old and while it got the job done it took its time doing it- he headed back to the living room and sat on the couch. His phone was waiting for him on the pillows, and he grabbed it as he kicked his shoes off.

Just in time too, as only a few minutes later Rambley came out of the bathroom and slipped behind his sheets. He returned only a couple of minutes later

with another sheet draped over him, ruffling it over his head and ears to try and dry them.

But all it succeeded in doing was fluffing it into a wild floof. His cheek tufts were fuzzed in a way that Ed could only compare to a five o'clock shadow in comparison; ruffled after a long day. It matched the glazed look in his eyes.

When Rambley couldn't muster up his usual enthusiasm you knew he had a rough day.

"Water's on," Ed said.

"Thank you. That should help warm me up a little."

Still sounding grumpy.

"...You look great?" Ed tried.

"Eh." Rambley gave a dismissive wave.

Well, he knew one thing that might cheer him up. He fished in his pocket and as Rambley walked over he whipped out the keycard.

“By the way, I’ve got something here you might want to take a look at.”

That got a smile back onto Rambley’s face. He eagerly rushed in and snatched it up, looking over the keycard and quickly confirming that it was the real deal.

“This is it! Perfect! Our ticket to the labs! Looks like another mission accomplished, eh Eddie?” Rambley beamed. “And now nothing’s stopping us from waltzing right into those labs and doing whatever it is we will have to do to progress further once inside! Thank you!”

“Thank Laura. She’s the one who went all the way out there to get it.”

“Oh, I certainly did! And on that topic, I might’ve invited her to come with us to the labs. Or she sort of

invited herself. Who was I to say no after she bravely entered the dragon's lair and survived to tell the tale? You wouldn't believe it, but Salem caught up to Laura on her way back from the swamp and let her go! And with that plushie being a dead giveaway to where she had been too."

"What? She didn't say anything about that!" Though she didn't really have a chance to. "What happened? Salem just let her go?"

"After stopping and grilling her, shockingly yes. She must be really good under pressure because Salem didn't suspect a thing! Or maybe they got distracted by having a fan. It's good to hold onto the ones you have when you don't have that many," Rambley said cheekily. "And Laura got to keep the souvenir, so it was a win-win for us."

"I guess so..."

He felt bad about letting her go without asking first. He just rushed them all out of the gate and took off, not even checking with Laura to make sure her

break-in attempt had gone alright. Some friend he was.

His guilt and concern must've shown on his face because Rambley noticed and softened his voice.

“Don’t worry about it, Eddie. It wasn’t anything like what happened with you. She was okay. She’s tougher than you think!” he assured.

“She is, I know. I should call her though. Send her a text or something.”

“Go ahead! Tell her I said hi!” Rambley chirped as he returned to his drying.

Ed quickly typed up and sent a message.

E: Rambley just told me about what happened with Salem. Are you ok?

Laura didn’t answer right away, likely still in the car with Katie. She didn’t mention any plans after

leaving the park but as long as she was outside of the park Ed wasn't too worried.

"Think it'll be safe taking her into the labs with us?" he asked

"Oh, she's not coming in. She's just coming to and then she's going to wait outside until we come out."

Ed quirked a brow doubtfully. "With Barlow?"

"I wouldn't worry about Barlow. It'll probably take weeks before he finds his way back from wherever he followed the tracks to," Rambley said confidently. "And I don't plan to stick around until dark."

A small buzz from Ed's phone signaled that a text had come in and he checked his screen.

L: omg ya I'll tell you when I get home. With Katie at goodies.

That sounded like an excited text, and she went out for food too, so it sounded like she walked away

alright. Ed was relieved by that, and now even a little curious to her reaction at seeing the real-life Salem in person.

It sounded like it went a lot smoother than Leo's run-in with Lloyd, and this was one of Lloyd's tamer run-ins!

Though now that he thought about it, how Lloyd acted and how easily he left, and what Rambley said-

"...Hey... about what happened with Leo..."

"Right! Laura wasn't the only one who got cornered today." Rambley stopped in his drying and looked at him attentively. "What happened with you two? You said Lloyd was just standing there?" Ed nodded and Rambley looked uneasy and unimpressed. "Yeesh, what a creeper."

"I know... you don't think the reason didn't attack me and Leo was because he saw he was a fan, do you? Because he was carrying the head-."

“No,” Rambley instantly shut down.

Ed was almost surprised at the sudden change in tone.

“Are you sure? He had the head right there. Why else would Lloyd hold back?”

“He wasn’t. He was waiting for an opening. That’s how Lloyd is, just a big cowardly lion hiding behind sharp claws and nasty teeth. Don’t forget how long he followed you around that warehouse before he pounced,” Rambley said sourly, still bitter about it.

That stamped out Ed’s theory. Or his faint glimmer of hope that maybe Lloyd could be reasoned with like Rambley and Salem. That maybe there was a shred of the old him hiding in that mascot.

Even if it was the Lloyd that Rambley hated.

He looked down at the phone. He still had that recording that Leo sent him. The one that sounded exactly like Rambley...

Rambley misread Ed's silence and sighed. "Okay, maybe he saw the head and thought that Leo was an employee. I'll give you that, that could've happened. The truth is, Lloyd was one of the more... obedient mascots until the park shut down, as much as I hate saying that."

Ed decided to hold off on the recording for now.

"I hate hearing it too. What does that mean?" he asked.

"It means Lloyd wasn't the sharpest tool but followed instructions... Until whatever happened." Rambley squinted at the keycard in his hand. "And maybe we'll find out what that whatever was in the security offices in the labs... But! Catch!"

He tossed the card back into Ed's hands and just as smoothly attempted to change topics.

“I’m putting you on keycard patrol, so don’t lose it!”

“I won’t,” Ed promised. He got out his wallet and slid it beside his license. “So, what now?”

“Today was a pretty big day for us both. I think we earned an early movie night, movie day, don’tcha think?” Rambley asked with an eager smile.

Ed thought that was a good idea. It had been a long day. The answers would come later; he knew he wouldn’t have to wait much longer, and he wasn’t eager enough to push the already worn-out Rambley.

“Sure. Let’s pick something out and then I’ll go check the water.”

Rambley hopped onto the couch beside Ed and curled up into a tight little ball. He scooted over and rested his chin on Ed’s shoulder, which seemed significantly closer than they usual sat, but Ed didn’t think much of it. Rambley was cold, wet, and had a

bad day. He probably needed the extra bit of warmth and assurance.

In the meantime, Ed started to go through his phone. Starting to scroll through options of what they could watch.

“Speaking of favorites...” Rambley spoke up. “Laura let the lion out of the bag on your little Lloyd secret, Buddy.”

Ed turned slowly to look at his shoulder and saw Rambley giving him a sly grin with narrowed eyes and knew exactly what he was getting at.

He hoped Laura enjoyed Goodies because it was going to be her last meal.

Ed couldn't tell if there was just a hint of jealousy behind that grin or not, but it seemed like the best thing to do would be to deny everything and downplay the rest.

“What secret? All the Indigo Park characters were my favorites. Lloyd was one of them. So, I guess you could call him one of my favorites, but it doesn’t mean much.”

“Uh huh, sure,” Rambley said.

“I wouldn’t even call him a favorite; I just had more merch of him. But that was a long time ago. Back when I was a kid. Way before he started chasing me around.”

“Mm-hmm.”

Scratch that. Rambley just seemed to be taking delight out of watching him flounder.

“...How about Gravewalkers?”

Rambley’s eyes opened. “Is it scary?”

“A little but it’s a comedy.”

“Sounds like my life. Let’s do it.” And right when Ed thought he was off the hook- “Sooo, what kind of merchandise did you have of ol’ Puff ‘n Fluff?”

“Did I ever tell you that I have an unopened original boxed figure of you?”

And just like that, Rambley’s eyes brightened up and Ed unhooked himself in an instant.

Only for a sudden pop up on his phone to suddenly get in the way of the whole ordeal.

20% Battery Remaining

“Uh oh. That might not last through a movie,” Rambley said.

“Might not last through the night,” Ed added.

“Sorry, Eddie. I swear I wasn’t using your phone for anything except talking with Laura. No videos or anything this time.”

“It’s okay! Don’t worry about it, I can charge it in my car,” Ed assured. He sat up and started to put his shoes back on.

Rambley got a look of dread.

“Wait! L-Let’s just watch TV on the TV. We don’t need the phone,” he fumbled out. With a brief instance of focus, the television clicked on and started a classic Indigo cartoon. “We’ve got plenty of movies and oodles of episodes, and the best part? They’re all about me! Hehe, but it’ll be a ton of fun.”

“We can do that, but I still should charge it a little in case of an emergency. And Laura. She already said she was going to text back later. If I don’t answer, she’ll think something’s wrong and rush back over here.”

Rambley’s hope deflated instantly.

“That’s a good point... But okay, here’s the thing. I... I don’t really feel safe being alone right now,”

Rambley murmured. His voice grew quieter with every word.

“I know. I don’t feel good leaving you alone either. So, why don’t you come with me? It won’t take that long,” Ed suggested.

“But what about the water?”

“I’ll turn it off. We can heat it back up.”

“But you’re parked outside. Wouldn’t that mean leaving the park?”

“Not really. I’m parked outside the main gate, but it’s still in the park. There’s a whole parking lot out there.”

It technically WAS part of the park, and it didn’t sound far, but...

Rambley’s ears started to fold back, and his eyes darted to the side nervously. Ed noticed it right away.

“But you don’t have to. You can wait here. Or in the Critter Corner. All I’ve got to do is plug it in and I’ll come back, we can hang out in there until its charged,” he suggested.

That could work, but the thought of doing that embarrassed Rambley.

“No, if I’m going then I’m going all the way. I can do it. It’s just to the parking lot, right?” Rambley rambled, talking himself up. He paused before giving a determined nod. “...It’s worth a shot. Let’s go.”

“Really? Okay, great! You just keep drying off and I’ll turn off the water,” Ed said. He could barely cover his budding excitement as he hurried to get that done before Rambley could change his mind.

Rambley, sitting on the couch stiffly rubbing the sheet into his fur and staring off into space, was already starting to change his mind.

Once Ed came out, he leapt up and quickly dried off a little more while hurrying to get his bandana. Then

he joined Ed at his side, putting on a smile to cover up any doubts, and they headed out.

It was still afternoon, but it had reached that part of the day when the temperature was starting to cool down. Ed didn't notice but Rambley was very aware of it. Mostly because he was still damp. He shivered a little, rubbing at his arms to try and create some friction. Ed caught him doing it and Rambley returned with a little smile.

Other than the slight nip to the air, the walk went well at first. Rambley and Ed were both keeping a careful eye out in case anything showed up. Rambley expecting Salem to come stomping back demanding their keycard and Ed almost convinced that Barlow would spontaneously show up with how their luck was.

But sure enough, they made it to the front gate in one piece.

And it was while walking up to the turnstiles leading up to that gate when Rambley started to feel very,

very nervous. It was as though the moment he realized “Oh, we’re at the gate” his heart started to work overtime. The chill was soon forgotten as he started to grow uncomfortably warm. His bandana was a little too tight too and pulling at it did little to help.

He figured it out the moment he stepped past that turnstile and felt like he was walking through cement. It could only be one thing.

Well, two things, actually. Either he was a lot more nervous than he realized, or there was some sort of built-in failsafe programmed into his mind to make his body fail if he wandered outside of the park.

He had considered that before. That the reason the mascots never left was because they were programmed not to, and that if they did there had to be a mechanism to either encourage them to turn back or incapacitate them somehow. Though he hadn’t even remembered that suspicion until right this second.

And now he couldn't tell if he was afraid, if something was going wrong in his body, or if something was going wrong and he couldn't tell because he was nervous that something was going to go wrong. And he couldn't tell.

By now Ed noticed that Rambley had fallen behind. He looked back and saw that look of utter panic on the raccoons' face and had a hunch what was going on.

"You okay, Buddy?"

"Me? I'm fine! Why wouldn't I be? Do I look okay? I don't look weird or anything, right?" Rambley chattered out. He accompanied it with the biggest, phoniest grin he had ever managed.

"You don't look weird, but you do look a little... uncomfortable," Ed said.

"I'm fine! Just a little cold is all," he excused, pulling at his bandana until it suddenly came undone, and he fumbled to catch it. "Whoops! Heh, how'd that

happen? Lemme just, uh... Just..." He struggled to get his hands to cooperate enough to tie it behind his neck. "Give me a second..."

"Take your time, but are you sure you want to do this? It's okay if you can't. Look, the Critter Corner's right there," Ed said, pointing to it. "You came far enough. Why don't you just sit tight right in there and I'll plug in my phone and come right back. We can just wait there until it's done."

"No! No, no. I'm okay. I've got this," Rambley insisted. He buckled down and tried to get that bandana tied.

He continued to fumble and struggle until the moment Ed started walking over with a hand raised like he was going to offer to help. Somehow, this gave Rambley the sudden drive to get his act together and get that bandana tied. Because he could do at least that himself, and it took some of the pressure off when he did.

He could do that. He could do things. He could do this. Maybe.

Ed started, "I'm sorry for putting you on the spot-."

"No. I... I want this," Rambley insisted.

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

But before Ed could so much as say anything, Rambley raised a finger.

"Just, umm. Th-Theoretical question time," he squeaked. He put his hands together. "Let's say you run a well-known and beloved amusement park about equally well-known and beloved characters. And let's also say that one day you figure out how to bring those characters to life as mascots. If that was you-." He pointed his hands to Ed. "...Would you put a failsafe in the mascots so that if they left the park they would, I don't know, have a sudden drive to go

running back inside or perhaps give them a spontaneous aneurism?”

Ed’s shocked look said it all.

Rambley quickly started waving his hands. “Never mind! Bad question, terrible question. I’m sure if there was something like that that I would know about it. I know almost everything there is to know about how I work! I would... Surely, I would know about that.”

“...Are you sure?” Ed asked. Though this time in quiet, creeping apprehension.

“...I don’t know.” Rambley sighed and began to wring his hands. He looked up at Ed and then leaned to the side to look past him and out the open doors of the main gate. “I don’t know if I should...”

Like Ed said, he could’ve walked into the Critter Corner and waited. That wouldn’t be so bad. He could even clean the place up a little, and surely it

would be a little warmer inside. He had already come pretty far.

But while the thought of stopping it here was relieving, it was also a little disappointing. His heart was pounding with worry but deep inside of it, he longed to go further. Even if it was a betrayal to the park.

He didn't want to abandon his home. This was his park, the one place that accepted him. The place where he was relatively safe and sound. Where he belonged.

But he wanted to see outside.

And now his head was too filled up with worries about fail safes and sudden death to even think rationally enough to balance out whether he really wanted it or not.

And Ed could tell too. At least, he could tell that Rambley was struggling with the decision. He could

see the way he was looking, and he noticed that despite giving him that out, Rambley wasn't taking it.

So, he decided to take the first step and make a choice.

"This might be stupid, but... maybe you should just go for it and see?"

Rambley's eyes widened a little bit, still aimed outside of the gate before slowly looking back to Ed. Maybe he could.

Ed offered him his hand. Rambley stared at it for a long second, considering his options, eyes darting around unsurely.

Then he took a deep breath,

and took his hand.

And walked alongside Ed as he slowly guided him to the main gate. Then he stepped through it with him and then continued towards the fence.

Rambley expected something terrible to happen. For the chip in his brain to explode or short-circuit, to suddenly feel something overtake him and march him back into the park, to have sirens blaring and dozens of vehicles suddenly drive up with antsy workers who throw nets over him and drag him away forever.

But none of that happened. It was just him and Ed walking to his car.

He held his breath as his heart pounded in his chest. Unintentionally squeezing Ed's hand tighter, which didn't go unnoticed. He looked to the raccoon and after a moment decided to offer again.

"You want to go back?"

But Rambley stiffly shook his head. Eyes ahead, mouth tight, but entirely determined. So, Ed didn't ask again. He just held his hand and kept going.

At first Rambley's eyes stayed locked in front of him, unable to look away, but soon he found himself daring to look around. He could see the trees and the parking lot. Nothing he couldn't have seen through the cameras, but now he was here, seeing it in person. It was overwhelming and incredible.

And then he saw the car. It was a simply grey car. He didn't know what kind, except that it just, well, looked like a normal car. Nothing super fancy but in good condition.

Ed got out his keys and pressed the button to unlock the car before leading Rambley to the passenger door and opening it for him. Unlike before with the bandana, Rambley let him do it, hesitant to so much as get in the car until Ed expressly opened the door for him too. Then he climbed in.

The car smelled like takeout. Like Ed must've left something in the car a little too long. Not enough to go bad, but enough to make the seats smell like it.

But it smelled like Ed just as much. That was comforting. Reassuring. Rambley didn't feel quite so out of place despite the fact that it was his first time in a car, and he looked around taking it all in.

Ed climbed into the driver's seat. He plugged in his phone and turned on the car so he could put the heater on, for Rambley's sake, then shot him a smile.

"You made it!"

"I did, didn't I? Huh. Woo!" Rambley said with a somewhat unenthusiastic and tired tone. Punctuated by him flopping against the passenger seat.

"How's it feel?"

"Okay! Just... Ugh." Rambley covered his face. "That was so embarrassing. Freaking out over walking into the parking lot. I've got to get out more..." he mumbled into his hands.

“Don’t beat yourself up. You did great! You did this. You decided to come out here and you did.”

“I guess so. I guess I just wish it was something really worth getting spooked over.”

“But it was. If I never left the place I grew up in I would’ve been scared too, and you had a lot more to worry about than leaving. Speaking of which, how are you feeling?”

“Shaky. But good shaky! Excited shaky, I think. I think if something was going to happen it probably, might’ve happened by now, but I’m feeling good!”
Rambley said. He started to get a little more excited.
“And hey, maybe I can go further! Not today, no. And I can’t really risk being on the road, but maybe someday we could go exploring in the woods behind the park! I’ve always wondered what’s back there. We could even see if the mysteriously abandoned Camp Rambley rumors are true. Imagine that!”

Watching Rambley perk up again, even if his rambles were clearly a little fueled by anxiety and

relief, more than made up for the risk. He had pulled through, and Ed was proud of him.

He had his hand resting on the middle console as he continued chatting away. Ed looked down at it, shrugged a little to himself, and dropped his own hand onto it, taking it again.

Rambley looked down at their hands in surprise before giving Ed a warmer smile, the kind that could've melted even the hardest of icy hearts, and then continued with a, "Where was I? Oh, right!"

Ed was fine just listening. Letting the phone charge and letting Rambley burn off all that nervousness. This was fine.

Except, there was one thing that hadn't been said. Now was as good a time as any. Rambley himself had brought it up. Rambley had been brave enough to walk out here, Ed could be brave enough to do it.

...He was going for it.

“Hey, so... How would you feel about coming home with me sometime?”

“Huh?”

“You let me stay over at your place all the time. I could return the favor,” Ed added, trying to keep it sounding casual. “You could come visit my apartment. We could do everything we do at your place, just at mine.”

“What? Really? Gee, I don’t know...” Rambley said unsurely. He rubbed at his neck. “That’s a little further than your car.”

“No pressure! It’s just an idea.”

“I know, but leaving the park... Coming out here is one thing. That was just me being weird. But leaving Indigo Park?” His gaze fell a little with a sinking smile. “That’s like giving up on my home.”

“It wouldn’t have to be a permanent thing. I meant like coming over and spending a night every once in

a while. You know, it's going to start getting cold soon. It might be nice to have a place to warm up."

"That might keep me from going into torpor..."
Rambley mumbled.

"And we could watch movies on a bigger screen! No battery required."

"...I... I think I wouldn't mind that."

Rambley looked down at his lap as he considered it before looking back at Ed.

"Maybe not yet, but someday! And that's not a 'no' someday, that's just an 'I'm not ready yet' someday. But if there's anywhere I'd go, it'd be there."

"Thanks." Ed let that hang for a second before forcing out- just get it out- "Just know that if anything happened to the park you'd have a place to go."

"I know." Rambley smiled sweetly. "Thank you, Eddie."

“You’re welcome, Buddy.”

After a few seconds of comfortable silence he added, “Plus, you could use my shower.”

Rambley gave him a look.

“What?”

He arched a brow.

“...I didn’t mean anything by that! I can’t smell any of that stuff, I just meant I had hot water.”

“Yeah, yeah, sure you did. Picking on an innocent raccoon,” Rambley said, giving him big goo-goo eyes.

“I don’t know about innocent. Let me check your search history.” He reached for his phone.

“NO, DON’T!”

The ensuing squabble over the phone ensured that everything was back to normal. A few days after getting the keycard, Ed found himself, Rambley, and Laura heading out to the labs.

He came well prepared. Phone charged, flashlight with backup batteries, and backpack emptied to carry whatever he found. He even bought a Swiss army knife in case there was another vent situation or something that needed to be pried open. Or jabbed at to try and stop it from mauling him.

Laura had brought her big purse and stuffed it with a bunch of things they might need. Including bandages and triple antibiotic ointment- in case of scrapes or cuts- and a little canister of pepper spray. Ed didn't have the heart to inform her that it probably wouldn't work on anything he had run into.

Then there was Rambley, who had decided not to bring his now discolored mocap suit and just come as-is with his bandana. If he couldn't put on a show on the screen, then he could at least make up for it in person.

Most of the trip had been filled with light small talk, but then Laura posed a question.

“Why would an amusement park have labs in it?” she asked.

Ed was sort of surprised it took her this long to ask. They had just disembarked the trolley- after a somewhat nerve-wracking ride backwards through the park- and it wasn't until they were walking up on the sphere- him, her, and Rambley- that she brought up the question.

“Because of their totally life-like mascots, of course! Case in point, this guy.” Rambley pointed a thumb at himself. “You can't just bake those in an oven. It takes a lot of time, patience, equipment, and at least a half-a-dozen heat lamps. It's a complicated process creating life.”

“No, I get that. I mean why have the labs in the park? It seems like it would've been a lot easier to

keep a sterile environment without all the guests walking around and trying to get in.”

“...Huh. That is a good point... I suppose to let parkgoers sneak a peek into the magic behind their favorite mascots! Not that they went anywhere near the operating labs, I’m sure, but they got to see the Dreamaginator offices. Which we might be stopping to take a peek into too, so I hope you’re excited!... Eddie, I see that look.”

“What look?” Ed asked.

“That look you get when you think I have a bad idea.”

“I think you mean my, ‘What do you mean, there’s giant crabs?’ look.”

Rambley snickered a little. “Don’t get your backpack straps in a tangle! Any mascots in the lab wouldn’t have been finished, so we shouldn’t run into anything... beyond more locked doors and a possibly trigger-happy security alarm- but! If we can

make it up to those Dreamaginator Offices, we might be able to find and activate a Royal Rangler Cuff for you. And by if, I mean this whole process will be a lot easier if we do. I won't have to stop and manually override every door. Plus, they look amazing! They're the perfect accessory!"

"Then that's our first stop. I'm always looking for something to match my bag," Ed joked.

Laura scoffed.

The three arrived at the front door to the labs shortly afterwards.

"Eddie, if you'll do the honors."

Ed pulled out his wallet and got out the keycard, which hadn't been touched since he put it there. He swiped it through the slot and there was a beep.

"Heh, uh, wipe off the bar and swipe it again, please."

Ed wiped it off with his shirt before swiping it again. This time it beeped out the Indigo jingle before the glass doors opened with a sharp squeak.

“And there we go! Welcome to Indigo Park’s own Indigo Industries Labs! Where the magic of the Indigo Cartoons is brought to life! Heh, literally,” Rambley said. He let Ed step in but when Laura tried to pass, he stuck out his arm to block her. “Ah, ah, ah! This week’s episode stars Ed Ensign and Rambley the Raccoon only.”

“And what am I, chopped liver?” Laura asked.

“You’re the woman on the outside! Our backup in case things go south. For example, if we get trapped in some sort of lockdown, you could go get the fire department!”

“And then you could pay my bail,” Ed added.

“Exactly!... Wait, no. No.” Rambley put his hands on his hips and gave Ed an unamused look. “No.”

“Maybe?”

“No.”

“Then can I at least stay in the lobby? I swear I won’t touch anything,” Laura shmoozed.

“Mmm... Well... Okay. I suppose since the door IS open it should be safe, but just in case, we should move something between them, so they don’t shut automatically. If they did, we’d be in real trouble.”

Ed looked around and grabbed a tall potted plant, which was clearly fake considering that it was still alive and sat it down in the doorway.

“Not exactly what I was expecting, but it should work. Good work, Rangler!” Rambley said. He swung his arm. “Now let’s get moving! We’ve got a pretty big building to search and only so many hours in a day to do it!”

With that they headed inside the lobby. The building was noticeably colder than the crisp autumn day

outside and the air smelling a little stagnant, but not bad. It smelled like a building that just hadn't been aired out in a long while.

Rambley unfocused to hook onto the system so that he could get the main lights on and get a look at the layout, but he found himself having a little trouble doing so. Normally it was a rather quick process, reach out and hook on, but this time it was as though there was nothing to hook onto. And it wasn't from his lack of a suit either.

"Huh. I think the system might be down..." Rambley mumbled. He lifted a finger for a pause and turned away, putting a hand on his head. "Just give me a second. I think I've got it..."

"What's wrong?" Laura whispered.

"He's trying to connect with the system."

"That's so cool."

"You should see him dance."

Laura gave him a funny look. “What?”

“Don’t you dare get that phone out, Eddie,” Rambley warned.

“Sorry, Buddy,” Ed said awkwardly, not realizing the raccoon had been listening. He gave a little cough and whispered, “He can dance and make it come on the screen at the same time.”

“Oh! Got it. Cool.” Laura leaned in and whispered, “Show me later.”

Ed gave a non-committal, “...Maybe.”

While Rambley gave a definite, “Nope.” Then waved for them to quiet down.

He had to focus, but it wasn’t them. Normally he could hear people talking and still be able to connect, like when he was doing in mid-conversation with Ed.

No, this wasn't a matter of distraction. This was something else. It was like there was nothing there- and when he pushed harder he was met with something like a wall. A virtual wall, a mental wall.

But there was something there right out of reach. Covering his eyes he used all his focus to reach out for it. He could visualize himself grabbing and holding on.

He pushed past the threshold and hooked onto the system.

And was instantly overwhelmed by it.

And it was as though something grabbed him and squeezed as tight as it could. His lungs clenched as all the air raced out of them, his head began to pound and tighten like it was in a vice, and there was static in his ears. He could see distorted blips from random camera feeds throughout the building, but it all blurred into an indecipherable mess.

He tried to pull back free, but it was as though the system was hooked onto him and wouldn't let go.

Until he was suddenly booted back out of the system.

But the sensations didn't stop. He realized he was still holding his breath and tried to inhale, but he was so frozen up that he couldn't. He shuddered as he tried, teeth chattering at how clenched his jaw was.

Something was wrong. Something was really wrong, and it wasn't in his head this time. It WAS his head. He uncovered his eyes and saw spots of color dancing on his vision.

"Whoa..." Rambley grabbed his head with both hands as the world rocked. "Whoooooa..."

Ed realized something was wrong. "Rambley?"

"You got a headache, Hun?" Laura asked.

"Nngh... huh..."

Suddenly Rambley swayed back on his feet and Ed lunged to grab him and just missed as the raccoon collapsed to the tiled floor.

“Oh my God, Rambley!” Laura cried.

“Rambley? Buddy?” Ed lifted his head and gently shook him. Rambley’s eyelids fluttered but he didn’t respond. “Okay, going outside.”

“Should I-?!”

“I’ve got him. Just watch the plant for me.”

Ed easily picked up Rambley and slipped out the open door. He started to head for the steps before pausing, looking around, and then heading around the edge of the building.

“Where are we going?” Laura asked, following at his heels.

“There’s a little sitting area around this way. See?”

He nodded at the bench as it came into sight and headed over to set Rambley down on it. He then pulled off his backpack and jacket so he could put the latter underneath his head.

Rambley's eyes continued to flutter a little more until he groaned and finally started to come around. His eyes focusing before he closed them tightly and hissed.

"Rambley?" Ed asked.

"What happened...?"

"You passed out." Ed dared a small smile. "Glad to have you back, Buddy."

The raccoon groaned and started to push himself up, but Laura quickly stopped him.

"Don't sit up, don't sit up! You might pass back out," Laura warned. She gently coaxed him back down.

“There we go. Just stay there. Can you follow my finger?”

“He didn’t pass out behind the wheel, Lor,” Ed said with slight amusement.

“I know what I’m doing,” she whispered back.

Rambley did so, wincing as the motion caused his head to throb.

“Looking good so far. Ed, hand me your flashlight.”

Ed did and Laura shined it in Rambley’s eyes. He winced even harder and reflexively turned away, but Laura caught his chin and turned him enough to check his pupils. They shrunk like they were supposed to.

“Good. No sudden stroke at least. Not that I expected that, but you never know.” She clicked off the flashlight and handed it back to Ed. “What happened? Did you suddenly get dizzy and fell?”

“No. Well, yes, but it wasn’t just dizzy. It was like my whole head was just...” He made squeezing, clawing motions with his hands at his head.

“It hurt you last time too,” Ed reminded.

“Yes, but I- *hiss* I really thought it was because we were outside,” Rambley said. He let his arms drop on the bench. “It was like I looked through the system and something looked back at me, and then it smacked me over the head with a hammer a bunch of times. Ugh, probably the anti-spyware.”

Ed carefully patted his head.

“Maybe you should wait here.”

“No, no. I’m okay.”

“No, come on. You wouldn’t let me go in there if I passed out, I’m not letting you.”

Ed barely moved before Rambley’s arms shot up and he caught his hand with both of his own.

“You can’t go in alone! Who knows what’s in there! And I can’t even connect with the cameras and screens or anything.”

“I thought you said there weren’t any mascots?”

“Mascots are the least of our problems if just walking in there knocked me out. There might be tougher security than I thought,” Rambley said nervously.

Ed put a hand on his shoulder and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

“We can make it work. Besides-.” He pulled out his phone. “-I’ve got my magic radio that doubles as a camera and flashlight. I’ve got this.”

“Well... Okay. I know you can handle yourself,” Rambley quietly caved. “But if any alarms start going off or you start feeling funny, turn around and come right back out. We’ve got the door open now; if we have to cut the power, we can.”

“You can do that?” Laura asked in surprise.

“Of course! There should be a fuse box somewhere.”

“Oh, I thought you meant- never mind.”

“Usually yes, maybe, but not in this case. For obvious reasons,” Rambley explained knowingly.

“I’ll keep you posted,” Ed said.

He had to practically drag his arm out of Rambley’s still vice-like grip to start heading around front. He gave Rambley a wave before he headed around the corner. Rambley, having now sat up to watch him, gave him a worried smile and a wave back.

Then Ed walked around the corner and back to the still open front doors.

He was sort of shocked Rambley hadn’t-

Ed’s phone started to ring. He answered it.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Buddy! Didja miss me?”

Speak of the devil. “Every second.”

“Gosh, that’s a whole five seconds! Must’ve been tough.”

Ed chuckled a little and walked into the labs a little less tense.

Not that the labs were that intimidating. Though that could be because he wasn’t in the labs, he was in the clean, refined lobby. He could only hope that reflected what he would find the deeper he went.

Like he saw from outside, there were two passages leading to the left and right of the elevators. The right one ended shortly in a door while the left one opened up. He stepped around the corner that way and found a stairwell leading upstairs that was open and welcoming, but notably no stairs downward.

Ed found them a few seconds later when he looked around and spotted a sign beside a white door that read 'stairwell', tucked off to the side and with a keycard slot and a Critter Cuff reader beside it.

He got the vibe instantly; an open staircase to welcome tourists upstairs to see their offices with the door to their semi-secret labs hidden out of the way and locked up tightly.

"I found the stairs."

"Do you see a directory anywhere?" Rambley asked.

"Hold on, let me check," Ed said. He looked around on the walls and soon found it behind him, on the wall of the corner he came around. "Found one! There's, wow, there's a lot of basement floors."

"I'm not surprised. Do you see anything that says, like, 'Bio Labs' or 'Mascot Manufacturing'?"

"...Yes. There's something called the Biotechnology Ward on subfloor three."

“Perfect! That’s probably where they work on mascot creation.”

Considering that there was a floor beneath it called ‘Incubation & Growth Chambers’ Rambley was probably onto something. The ‘Black Stripe Containment Quarters’ below them didn’t sound too charming either.

“And they might have the backups there?”

“That’s the only place they could be! That’s where the magic happens, Buddy. Where a cartoon character with a dream becomes yours truly on the screen!... But like I said, they don’t just let mascots run around in there- probably why I passed out, actually...” He mumbled that last part. “...Do you see what floor the Dreamaginator’s Offices are on?”

“Fourth, upstairs. Heading there now.” Ed walked around the corner and pressed the button for the elevator. The doors dinged and opened.

“Great! You just keep me in the loop- DON’T GET IN THE ELEVATOR!”

Ed jumped at the sudden yell. “...What?”

“Hehe, sorry. Just, uh. We’re sort of running on limited power. Using something as energy consuming as the elevator could trip something and trap you inside. And trust me, climbing out the top only works in movies.”

Ed exhaled. “Thanks for the warning.”

“That warning almost gave me a heart attack,” Laura could be heard saying in the background.

“It got my point across,” Rambley said cheekily.

Ed smiled a little and headed back to the stairs, quickly going up them and making it to the fourth floor a few minutes later. A large mural of Indigo Park’s main cast greeted him on the wall in front of him, with bubble letters that spelled out “Welcome to

the Dreamaginator Offices! Where Dreams Come True!”

An open doorway nearby led into a large office room broken up by cubicles, looking closer to an accounting office than anything else- though it was still what Ed was expecting. Save that instead of a lot of number crunching, it looked like there were a lot of fliers, pictures, and sketches scattered through and taped to the walls of the cubicles.

Along with a ton of them scattered on the floor. There was at least a filing cabinet’s worth of paper scattered around the room.

On the far side of the room Ed could see a cut-out and a big whiteboard. Curious, he started to head over there, peeking into the cubicles as he went. Papers crinkling under his shoes and there being too many to avoid.

On the whiteboard were comments and charts discussing promotions and a couple of posters were pinned to a corkboard nearby, like they were there to

be compared. All three showing images of Rambley and advertised meeting him.

It looked like they had been working away on some sort of ad campaign when everything shut down.

Though what was interesting was that the images in the promotional material weren't of cartoon Rambley the Raccoon, they were of the real Rambley. They were running a promotional campaign advertising- and this was directly from the fliers- the brand new and improved Rambley the Raccoon mascot. Lifelike! Super-soft! Safe for all ages!

Ed wasn't sure why but seeing this promotion had a weird effect on him. At first, he thought it was pretty cute, thought it was great to see Rambley getting some attention. But then he looked at those blurbs, like they were advertising a toy at the mall, and suddenly he had a sinking feeling in his gut.

He knew they didn't treat Rambley like a person, but this sealed it. This made it clear that Rambley was an oversized marketable plushie for the park.

Which made it so much worse that they had abandoned him here.

The first thing he was going to do when he walked out of this place was give him a big hug.

Though before that he was going to have to figure out where he was supposed to go. He pulled up his phone.

“So, where would these Critter Cuffs be?”

Rambley popped on quickly. “You’ll want to find the Managing Director’s office. Since almost all the Dreamagimators had Royal Rangler access, his desk is our best bet for finding a spare without having to access the warehouse and the greater systems—which I can’t for obvious reasons.”

“Got it. I’ll look around.”

Ed made his way back out into the hall and started down, checking any doors he passed. There were

framed posters of classic cartoons hung on the wall, even black and white ones. Though he didn't recognize those.

Going around the corner at the end of the hall, he got to a longer hallway. One with fewer doors and a large window along the opposite wall that pointed off towards the eastern section of the park. Though most of the view was blocked by the Tilt-and-Tumble ride which stood proudly above the restaurant between it and the labs.

In hindsight, an awful place for a restaurant, but the Rambley head-shaped mini-pizzas were always a treat.

More importantly, at the end of the hall was a door to the right and one at the end, which had an exit sign above it. Another fake potted plant sat in the corner between them.

The little plaque outside the door read: Otis Hoover – Managing Director.

So that was the Managing Director of the Dreamaginators. Technically this would be the guy replacing Isaac Indigo, wouldn't he be? They probably had a CEO, but if it was true that Isaac was the heart behind the cartoons and park then this was who stepped into his shoes.

Ed wondered if he was anything like Isaac. If he had just as much care for his characters. He couldn't say for sure, but unless he found out Isaac was behind the treatment of the mascots, probably no.

Though if he did find that out, he would have much more important things to think about.

The door wasn't locked. In fact, it wasn't even shut, open just the slightest bit. As though someone pushed it closed behind themselves and didn't get it all the way in.

He braced himself for what he would find- did Isaac leave anything behind? Only one way to find out. He opened the door and stepped in.

...But of course, it wasn't Isaac Indigo's office. It hadn't been in a long time, if ever. Now it was just a small room with a desk and a bookcase, one that was so lacking in Indigo Park theming that it could've been found in any building.

It was a shame. He was kind of hoping that due to his untimely death that it might've just been left as a time capsule or something...

But that didn't mean there wasn't anything to find. He had found something interesting waiting on the desk.

Someone had left their laptop behind. It was sitting open on the desk with a sheet of dust coating the screen.

Ed walked around the desk to take a better look at it. It was one of those expensive Mindpads, though a few years old. Not the sort of thing you would leave behind in your office unless you had to get out of dodge fast.

“More evidence that something big happened,” Ed noted to himself. “And either he ran out of here because he didn’t want to take the blame or because he was afraid for his life. Or he thought he was stepping out for a second and... never came back.”

Something was off about this whole thing. Ed got out his phone to take a picture before he touched anything.

It was while taking the second picture at another angle that he noticed the thumb drive sticking out of the side of the laptop. Now that was very interesting.

He pressed the computer’s power button to see if it would come on. Nothing. He checked to see if the charging cord was plugged in. It was. Still nothing. Something must’ve died and if it wasn’t the wall socket then it was something in the computer.

He almost considered taking it with him, but he also didn’t like the idea of running around downstairs while being weighed down by a technically swiped computer. Instead, he unplugged the flash drive and

put it into his bag where it wouldn't get dropped or damaged.

He then went through some of the papers left on the desk. There was a lot of paperwork that didn't hold anything of importance. Most of it was stuff involving the mascot rebranding. There was a post it note stuck to the desk that read: "Call Darcy!" But it had no number or explanation.

He continued to check the drawers, eagerly hoping that there would be something more hiding in them. Other than the bottle of Jack Daniels hidden behind some stuff in the upper right drawer he didn't find anything more than office supplies.

Until he got into the bottom left drawer, which had a keyhole on it but wasn't locked. Likely because it was an antique desk, and the locking mechanism probably didn't work even if they did have a key.

In there he found four Critter Cuffs. They were a little bent like they had been worn before but otherwise looked undamaged, with only one having a scuff on

it. These cuffs looked a lot like his own, save that instead of purple accents they were dark blue, and the Rambley heads had mustard yellow crowns on their heads.

These had to be the Royal Rangler cuffs. If the crowns weren't a dead giveaway. He lifted his phone to his mouth again.

"I think I found some Royal Rangler cuffs. They've got little crowns on them?"

"That's it! Are they still working? Quick, put your Critter Cuff near one and see if it responds!"

Ed brought his cuff up against the others. Only one of them dimly glowed to life, in a yellow color to match the crown.

"One of them came on."

"Yes, YES! Oh, we are so lucky, Eddie! Those batteries last a long time, but not THAT long. It must've been freshly charged before the park

closed. Hmm, though it is strange that it was left behind. Where did you find them?”

“In the manager’s desk.”

“Heh, guess I guessed right! And I guess we shouldn’t look a gift horse in the mouth. Since it’s responding that means it’s already been activated, so it’s good to go! We can update it with your specifications later.”

“Works for me.”

Ed set his phone down and started to take his Critter Cuff off, then hesitated. After a moment of consideration, he put the Royal Rangler cuff on his left wrist instead. He’d rather look a little weird than risk getting cornered by something and not having a working cuff on hand.

Though would it still work if Rambley wasn’t on the system? Ed had a bad feeling it wouldn’t, and that bad feeling was him knowing it wouldn’t.

Maybe Laura had a point in bringing that pepper spray.

“Alright, I’m heading back downstairs,” he said once finished.

“Okie-dokie! Tell me when you’re back in the lobby, please. I hate not knowing where you are...”

Ed smiled at the little grumble at the end and put the rest of the cuffs in his bag, just in case they could use them. After some consideration, he took the Jack Daniels too. Just in case he needed... well it was here.

So, he found what he was looking for. Yet Ed still felt a little disappointed.

You would think some high up manager would have something a little more interesting in his office, or a clue towards what happened here beyond that everyone left quickly. Nothing about what happened to Indigo Park, and nothing on Isaac Indigo himself.

Ed sighed and shut the laptop out of reflex before looking around one more time and heading to the door.

Except then he noticed something else. Something in the corner behind the door, so he hadn't seen it when he walked in.

There was a picture frame lying face down on the ground.

He went to pick it up and found it half-stuck to the carpet, from the broken glass catching on the fibers. It was shattered, the frame was broken, and the back was bent in a little. It looked like it had been on the desk, thrown across the room, and then stomped on. He carefully picked at it until he got it up enough to see.

There was a balding middle-aged man along with a blond woman and two little girls. It looked like a professionally done photo, but the family looked happy. It must've been on the desk and this was probably Mr. Hoover.

Question was, did Hoover do this himself or was it a disgruntled employee? Odds are the latter, but that didn't explain why they targeted the picture and not the open laptop sitting on the desk.

So far Ed expedition had uncovered a planned ad campaign to get Rambley out to the public, the fact that everyone split the park whenever whatever happened went down, that they left almost everything, and that there were possibly angry employees in the mix.

Hopefully there would be a little more downstairs. Hopefully it'd be as easy to find.

He made it downstairs before heading to the other stairwell. He tried his normal Critter Cuff first, to which it received a negative beep. Then he tried the Royal Rangler Cuff and was rewarded with a positive tone and the click of a door unlocking.

Ed opened the door to find a typical stairwell, illuminated by lights at each landing which came on

when he opened the door. It felt nearly ten degrees colder just stepping through that doorway.

Save for the hum of the lights, it was ominously quiet in the stairwell. Or had that echo-y hollowness that seemed to fill the ears. Ed tried to break it by turning back to his source of companionship.

“It worked! I’m in the stairwell, heading downstairs now.”

“Perfect! But be very, VERY careful down there, okay? I really don’t think there’s anybody down there, but if something goes wrong, I’m going to have to send Laura in alone... Not that she couldn’t handle it on her own! Hehe.”

Ed could only imagine the look Laura must’ve shot him. He was sure he had seen it before. At least it lightened the chilly atmosphere.

“Well, I guess I’ll leave you to it! But keep your phone on and I’ll keep an ear out.”

“Wait, before you do,” Ed said. “What do you know about Isaac Indigo?”

“You mean the creator of the Indigo Cartoons AND Indigo Park? I know a ton! Growing up in a small town, he always dreamed of creating a place like Indigo Park, but he thought they were all pipe dreams. But little did he know but those small-town dreams would become a VERY big deal! While starting off as a used car salesman, Isaac Indigo was able to break his way into the animation industry and wowed his colleagues with ideas about a majestic-... a majestic little raccoon named Rambley.”

And that was exactly the moment that Ed realized this was a memorized speech, because that was probably not supposed to be a majestic raccoon. He smiled to himself but didn’t interrupt.

“And the rest is history! There’s plenty more, but I’d have to break out the PowerPoint and for that I’d need screen access and my green suit.”

“I’ll have to hear the whole story sometime, but I meant... I guess I meant, did you know him? Did you ever meet him?”

“I... I would’ve loved to, but I didn’t get to. By time I was made, Mr. Indigo was no longer at the park... I think he might’ve passed away by then.”

...Right. Made sense.

“Sorry, Eddie...”

“No! Don’t be sorry. What are you sorry for?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Bringing down the mood?”

“Rambley, I’m standing in a stairwell that feels like a freezer looking for a ‘Bio Ward’. I think the mood fits.”

“Heh, well, when you put it that way...”

“It’s weird not having you with me. Sort of creepy, you really brighten things up.”

“D’aww, you’re just saying that!” Rambley said with a little giggle. “Trust me, I wish I was there with you, but I know you’ll do alright on your own. I’ve got nothing but faith in you!”

It was almost relieving hearing Rambley say that. It almost made Ed feel a little more confident, even as he was approaching the third subfloor landing.

“It’s a shame, though. Just a few more years and I might’ve been able to meet him, even if I didn’t have a body yet. Imagine meeting the man behind your creation! Or, no, technically it was Simon Flatts who first created the Rambley character- but Mr. Indigo was the one who really brought me to life! Even if he wasn’t around to bring ME to life.”

Laura was quiet throughout the whole exchange. Ed knew why.

“I get it. I’m sure he would’ve wanted that too,” he said. “But I’m at the landing and heading in. I’ll get back to you.”

“Sure thing! Keep your eyes peeled and don’t trip any silent alarms!”

Ed paused at the door for a long second as he mentally pictured himself opening the door and immediately setting off dozens of sirens throughout the entire building. It wasn’t until he properly envisioned himself getting led away in handcuffs that he shrugged it off- well, if it was going to happen anyways- and headed inside. Thankfully, that did not happen.

What happened was that he walked into a completely different building.

If upstairs looked like an empty accounting office, downstairs looked like an abandoned hospital. Lacking any gurneys or obvious equipment, but the feel, and smell, matched up from the last time he poked around a hospital that had been closed for years.

When he flicked the light switch only a few sparse lights came on, with most of the ceiling lights being out. The ones that weren't cast a yellowish glow that did little to cheer the dreary atmosphere. The walls were off-white and devoid of any murals or pictures of any kind. No windows either, obviously.

The only things of note were some faded arrows painted on the wall across from him. They were colored light purple, mint green, soft pink, and baby blue. The light purple, soft pink, and baby blue lines pointed down the right hallway, which eventually split into another hallway and had plenty of metal doors with windows in them.

The light purple guiding arrow was labeled as "Security", the soft pink as "Phlebotomy & Genetic Processing Lab", and the baby blue pointing to "Cryo Maintenance".

The mint green arrow pointed to the left and was labelled "Biotechnology Ward." Ed followed it with his eyes, and it led to the end of the hall and a pair of double doors that came out of a hospital. He

headed that way, passing by what looked to be a janitor's closet and an open doorway to the left that led around a corner.

... Huh, the floor was sticky. He looked down at it and even got out and shined his flashlight on it to see if there was any discoloration, but there didn't seem to be. It was just sticky. Maybe something spilled?

Maybe something was cleaned up.

Ed took a deep breath and pressed on, feeling like he just walked over a huge warning sign.

On the wall beside the double doors was a pin pad and a Critter Cuff scanner underneath it. Ed scanned his Royal Rangler Cuff, but much to his dismay he got a negative tone in response and the doors didn't budge.

"Why didn't it work?" he murmured. He looked down at the Royal Cuff and tapped on it. It flickered a little.

“I guess lighting up doesn’t exactly mean it’s working...”

His musing was interrupted by a very familiar voice coming from a speaker directly above his head.

“Hi there! And welcome to Indigo Park’s Biotechnology Ward! The ward is currently under emergency lockdown. Sorry! Please enter the access pin to continue.”

Ed went from surprised, to confused, to amused as he realized halfway through that the voice currently talking to him wasn’t Rambley but an automated one. It was kind of surreal when you considered Rambley himself was already a little automated.

But it looked like he reached a dead end already. He looked towards that doorway to his left again, since it looked like it-

“Or, if you’re a Royal Rangler you can take a left at the doors and head through the Royal Rangler entrance! Are YOU a Royal Rangler?”

Ed looked up again, startled.

“I... Huh?” he said dumbly.

But there was no response. Because it was just a recording, like he already knew. It was just the weird timing that threw him off.

He shrugged it off and headed into the doorway. Around the corner was a short hallway to another secure door, one with a Critter Cuff scanner mounted on the wall beside it. Above the door was “Royal Ranglers Only” stenciled in bold letters.

He tried the Royal Rangler cuff and, sure enough, there was a positive dinging.

“Welcome: Herbert Barr,” an automated non-Rambley voice spoke.

The door opened to a sort of weird sitting room. It almost looked like the waiting room at a doctor’s office, though without any windows and

exceptionally tight. Only three chairs sat on the left wall. Straight ahead was some sort of metal security door, this one lacking a cuff reader. He guessed that they had to get buzzed through or something.

But to the right there was something a little more interesting. On the wall was a square opening that led into a chute with a conveyor in it, with a button on the wall beside it that likely turned it on.

Above the chute was printed: “Deliveries” and looking through, and shining his flashlight through, Ed could see that it was only a short way until it let out into another room.

Well, he had gone through worse. He lifted his phone.

“Hey, I’m about to crawl through a tight squeeze-.”

“Crawl through a what...?”

“-so, I’m going to hang up for a couple of minutes and I’ll call you back, okay?”

“Oookay. Just, uh, be extra careful with any squeezing. You don’t want to get stuck in a sticky situation like I did.”

“Yeah, and blue,” Ed said absentmindedly. Still focusing on looking through the chute.

“That’s not what I meant, but sure,” Rambley said, unenthused.

“I’ll be careful.”

“Don’t worry, he’s got experience with this! He once got stuck in a crawlspace under his house for like two hours,” Laura joking chimed in.

“...He did WHAT?!”

“Got to go,” Ed said and quickly hung up before he could get dragged in.

He slipped off his backpack and started pushing it into the chute before climbing in after it. It was a tight

squeeze, but he knew he could manage it. He had managed through much tighter. He began to slide in-

He heard someone talking.

Ed pushed back himself back out, straightened up quickly, and listened closely. Sure enough, he could hear a voice coming from where he had come from.

But it was Rambley's. Or, no, the automated Rambley recording, who had started a spiel of its own. Though it was too quiet to make out what it was saying. It just sounded like mumbling mush through the thick walls.

Ed eyed the corner at the end of the hall for a long second before his heart started to pound in his chest. Taking a deep breath, he all but dove headfirst into the delivery chut and crawled through.

He didn't want to wait around to see what had caused the automated recording to go off. Ed climbed out of the delivery chute and into a small storage room with some shelves and boxes. Nothing

too interesting to note, and many of the boxes had been picked clean. So, he headed through the door.

He found himself in a room with a large cleaning station against the wall across from him. There were multiple sinks, boxes of gloves, plenty of decontamination products; he could even see what looked like a shower cap laying on the counter. This had to be some sort of decontamination room of some kind. To his left was a door that led to the other door into the waiting room.

But to the right was a frosted glass door with “Lab Entrance C” printed in bold blue lettering. There wasn’t a handle on the door, but there was a big silver button on the wall beside it. Ed pressed it and after a few seconds the door slowly swung open with a squeak.

Somehow, what he saw on the other side was both exactly what he expected and the last thing he expected to see.

It revealed what was yet another corridor, but this one was lined with thick glass windows on either side, and through those windows Ed could see multiple rooms. Small, sterile grey rooms with tables and equipment. Not hospital rooms but testing rooms of some kind.

In an instant Ed was both excited for and deeply dreading what he was about to find. But they would be answers nonetheless, so he started peeking in windows. Almost instantly he was hit by a gruesome sight.

In one of the rooms there was a steel table with a monitor setup on a smaller table at its foot. It almost looked like a little surgery room. If not from the table, then from the heavily decomposed mass laying on it. It looked to be in the shape of a large fish but had rotted and then mummified. It looked like its belly had been slit open too.

A tight knot grew in Ed's own stomach as he tried the door. He stepped in expecting to be hit by an

overwhelming smell, but it only smelled a little funky inside. It had been so long that even that went away.

He dared to walk closer and looked down at the body. It was a fish alright. He wasn't sure what kind but clearly not a mascot.

There was a yellow sticky note lying on the desk. It must've been attached to the corner of the monitor before losing its stickiness and falling. Ed turned it over to read and the tightness in his stomach loosened.

“Cause of Death- consumption of plastic decorations.”

Okay, so it was an autopsy. That was still pretty gruesome, but a little less so than what it could've been. No less creepy though. Equally concerning too. Why would it eat plastic? Was it hungry, or did it mistake it for a real fish? A look into the metal bin on the floor showed what looked to be a plastic, smiling clownfish hiding under a lot of dried grime. Could've been either reason, honestly.

He left the room and moved onto the next one. There he found a similar layout, but nothing there, and then the next one was a table covered in paperwork- all of which turned out to be reports on the various zoo environments around the park. He snorted when he noticed a line mentioning that the crabs were getting 'a little larger than expected'.

For the next while, Ed was walking around blindly through that wing of the labs and found much less than he expected. The most interesting thing he found was a bone saw, but no conveniently left behind papers detailing the secrets of Indigo Park's mascot creation. It was a little disappointing.

But eventually he managed to make his way into the lobby on the other side of the double doors that he had to go around. It was mostly a small reception area with a desk and little else, clearly not a place to sit down but just one to pass through while into the labs proper. Still, he checked the desk, and that's when he finally found something worth merit.

There was a ledger laid open on the desk as though someone had been searching through it before leaving. It was open to a list of character names and rooms.

Rambley Raccoon – 2-6

Mollie Macaw – 2-7

Lloyd Lion – 2-8

Finley Serpent – 3-2

Salem Skunk – 3-3

Raspberry Raccoon – 3-4

Sally Shoebill – 3-5 - (Pending Reassignment)

Panko Probo – 3-6

The list continued on, but Ed was more interested in the location of Mollie's room, which was likely his best chance at finding this supposed backup disc. Now he just had to figure out where these rooms were.

And wouldn't you know it, but one of the few things in the lobby other than the desk was a map of the biotechnology ward. Ed took a picture with his phone to take with him and was able to quickly locate the

Mollie room- in the far south-east of the floor, naturally.

He set off through the back doors and started to head down a sterile hallway. Each footstep echoing on the tile.

“Looks like the quickest way is through the operating theater... Forget it, I’ll take the long way.”

He came to the split at the end of the hall between the surgery section of the ward and the door leading past it and tried it, only to find it locked. He tried the handle again hoping it would spontaneously decide to open, but alas, no dice. He regretfully walked into surgery and then entered the operating theater with a mix of trepidation and curiosity.

It wasn’t as big as he expected it to be. Just a white room shaped like a half circle with stands sitting above the operating area. They only looked like they could fit thirty people max.

Instead of a table, at the center of the operating theater was a large chair. It almost looked like a dentist's chair, save that it was a little bigger, sturdier, and had a few notable... adjustments.

The surgical chair was a little terrifying to look at. It was shredded at the end of the arms and at the bottom, like something had clawed it up while being worked on. There were heavy metal restraint cuffs at the arms, legs, and neck. They sat open, allowing Ed to see how they locked together and how thick they were. Nothing could pull out of these.

...Were they operating on the mascots while they were awake?

The floor was sticky here too.

Ed strode through quickly, eyeing the chair as he passed, when he just happened to notice something on a nearby metal table. It was one of those small ones used in surgery to hold the tools, but there weren't any on it. Just a stained stretch of white cloth crumbled up on top and a piece of paper sticking

halfway off, nearly joining a few that had fallen and nearly blended with the white tiled floor.

He gathered them all up and skimmed, but only the one still on the table held anything of real interest. It seemed to be some sort of report, though why it had been left in here was a mystery to him.

What it said though...

Mascot: Panko-2 (Primate, Mammal)

Procedure: Exploratory Surgery

Symptoms: Increased Aggression, Excessive Salivation, Seizures.

Findings: Panko showed symptoms of viral activity which escalated as cranial pressure increased.

Panko was put into a medicated coma and treated for two weeks with antiviral before surgery began.

Upon removing the cranial cap, it was visually confirmed that necrotic tissue had formed entirely around the Sparklight chip. This is believed to be the cause of the seizure activity and aggression.

Due to the advanced state of infection and extensive

damage to the brain, euthanasia was recommended and performed. The body will be moved to cryo-refrigeration while autopsy is scheduled.

Conclusion: Between these findings and the successful immunity of R.org.2, it is in Indigo's best interest to grow artificial brains built alongside the chip rather than current methods of implanting chips onto already developed brains. Artificial brains will need to be treated with antiviral solutions to guarantee total immunity to the virus. All early-stage mascots will require replacement by improved models.

Well, he finally got answers of some kind. But they were the last ones he wanted. Especially since he had already heard about this supposed brain chip from Rambley. From it being in Rambley's brain.

He scanned over the disturbing description again. Some sort of virus destroying the brains of the mascots- is that why the mascots were so feral? But Mollie seemed to have some amount of intelligence,

but she was also aggressive, but couldn't that have just been because they were caged? All early mascots would need to be replaced- Ed had a hunch what that meant.

The chips rotting brains away, and Rambley... Wait-

He double-checked it again. Improved models. The advertisement campaign upstairs. That meant-

Ed let out the biggest sigh of relief he ever had in his entire life. Rambley WAS a newer model. Brand new if those ads were any indication, and he himself said it was his second body. He was immune. He was safe.

Ed was still going to give him the biggest hug ever when he got out of here.

...But maybe this explained Finley's behavior. Finley had been especially aggressive. He acted like something that was going off the deep end- pun intended. Or maybe it just hadn't spread to any of them yet.

Except Panko, poor guy. Ed didn't remember the character, but he could've only imagined what it must've been like. He had to be in pain.

Maybe it was best to not bring that up with Rambley.

...But maybe, if he was careful, maybe he would ask him if he has been in that chair.

Ed made his way out of the operating theater and continued through the ward. He finally found the research rooms, though he had to climb over an ominous looking barricade to reach them. Ominous both in why it was there and the fact that it was made of shaky shelves that threatened to collapse and impale him the entire time.

He then found the Mollie Macaw research room, or whatever it was. He knew even before he checked the numbers because there was a laminated Mollie poster hung up beside the door. There was a check-in sheet too with initials, dates, and times for any researchers who went inside. Most of them were

the same initials so one person was doing most of the work.

The problem that stood before him now was the door. It wasn't a normal door, but one of those vertically closing security doors. The ones that looked more like blast doors than anything that should be in a park.

Though they weren't too out of place here. What was out of place was a door handle or even a button or keypad for the door- all were missing. There was no way to open the door.

"Maybe there's a way around," Ed thought. He opened the picture of the map and zoomed in. It didn't look like there was another way in, but there had to be a way to open it. Or at least override the lockdown. "...Hey, wait. There's a security office right there. Couldn't I just turn off the lockdown from in there?"

He could, but not without Rambley's help.

He quickly backed out of the photos and called Laura, and Rambley, back. After only one ring the call was answered.

“H-Ilo?” Rambley said.

“It’s me. Sorry, I got caught up looking around.”

“He-Hey Eddie! Tha-ss-at’s -kay- whoa. Phone’s....ike it’s out! Ar—are you alri-?”

Ed’s heart sunk. Of all the times to start losing service- and his phone usually did fine even in the middle of nowhere! He guessed that being this far underground with all this metal was disrupting the signal.

“I’m okay, don’t worry. But you’re sort of breaking up,” Ed said.

There was the tone of the call ending.

He gave a slightly exasperated exhale and tried to call back. It looked like Rambley picked up but he wasn't hearing anything through the phone.

Just in case Rambley could still hear him, he said, "Rambley, if you can hear me, I'm fine. The phone's just losing service. I'm going to keep going and I'll call you back later." Then he waited a few seconds and hung up.

Scratch that, he was doing this without Rambley's help.

On the plus side, he wasn't far from a hallway that led down the southern wall and right to a backdoor into the security office, so he wouldn't have to walk all the way back to the delivery chute.

It also spared him from revisiting the surgical theater. He could've gone without walking back through there.

He headed down the hallway and around the corner and down another hallway, and after a short while he

found himself at the other door into the security room. Thankfully, this was a normal door, and the Royal Rangler cuff opened it right up to him.

The security office looked a lot more advanced than the one in Jetstream Junction. The wall of screens seemed to have more packed into it, there was a proper control panel laid out before it, and there was even a cluster of computers and a thicker monitor that looked like an older TV screen on a desk against the wall to the right of the panel, right beside the door where he came in.

Other than that, there was a short line of lockers in the back, a small leathery couch beside the other door, and a trip of office chairs. The normal fair for a security office.

Ed began to scan the control panel first thing. There were a lot of unlabeled buttons- well, buttons labeled with numbers, seemingly going to the various rooms. Ed didn't want to touch anything until he could make heads or tails of it, and despite the fact that he was

familiar with computers he was going in completely blind here.

Until he spotted a glass box jutting out to the far left and squinted at the small, white letters printed on it. 'Emergency Lockdown' was half-faded and partially scraped off the glass. There was a small round scanner at the front of the box and Ed scanned his critter cuff on a hunch. It popped open and he easily switched off the lockdown.

And instantly all the power went off.

"Yeah, I should've expected that..." Ed sighed.

The power suddenly clicked back on, and the monitors booted back up.

"Huh?... Huh."

There was a loud beep from a speaker on the ceiling before an automated feminine voice spoke-

“The Security Lockdown in: (Biotechnology Ward & Research) has been lifted. Thank you for your patience and return to your assigned stations and duties.”

Ed took that as his cue to get back to work. He turned back towards the door when he noticed a static screen that was darkened out before. The one that looked like an old TV screen. It must’ve flipped on from the power being rebooted.

And because of that, he noticed the tape player underneath it. It almost looked like a VHS player, but much smaller. He instantly remembered the tape in his bag and slung it off to grab it.

Sure enough, it matched the size exactly. He pushed open the flap to see if there was a tape inside. There was, and after only a second of consideration he pressed play. There was a whirring noise as the tape rewound itself.

It was crazy that they still used tapes here. All the stuff in the labs looked relatively new, but this security office was seriously dated.

It must've been here for a long time, Ed thought. He took a quick picture with his phone before looking back quickly as the tape had begun to play.

There was footage from the lobby playing on the screen. Something that raised a red flag immediately, and then twenty more when he saw himself walk up outside the glass door with Rambley at his side. It was just the two of them, so it had to be from their initial trip to the labs and a quick check of the date in the corner, yes, it was.

The footage continued through the entirety of their time outside before abruptly cutting off a few seconds after they walked out of view. That was it. That was the whole thing.

And it made Ed's stomach squirm. Had it been automated... or was someone watching them?

...

Salem, probably.

The balloon of dread in Ed's chest deflated as he realized that this had to be a Salem prank.

They already proved themselves to be devious and a tape of himself in a player for him to find right after Laura swiped their lab keycard? It was too coincidental. They were probably behind the lockdown too. Or at least knew he'd have to come here to shut it off.

Little did they know, but Ed had a way of getting into places where he wasn't supposed to be. He felt proud about it now seeing how he bypassed the whole prank.

But there was one thing Salem hadn't touched. Ed flipped the arcade cabinet tape in his hand and pressed the button to eject the other one. Then he slid it into the slot and pressed the play button.

Surprisingly, this one didn't have to rewind. It just started right away.

The footage was from inside of the Main Stage Theater. It was at a weird angle, sitting high above and pointed towards the audience with only a little bit of the stage showing. It had to have been mounted by the curtains or something.

The theater was packed with kids and adults of all kinds. A few nicely dressed families stood out like sore thumbs against a sea of traditional tourist garb and dozens of Rambley ears.

One kid towards the front looked to be three or four and was standing on his seat, bouncing on it without his parents showing any concern. Though he could see the man in the seat in front of him, which he was holding onto the back of, scrunch his face up and look back more than once.

There was another family that was in full Indigo Park character gear. Ed spotted them right away since the mom was wearing a Mollie Macaw hat that looked

like her head and it immediately reminded him of his mom. The dad wore a Finley shirt and hat and there were two kids both dressed in Rambley merchandise.

It was like playing Where's Waldo on TV. No matter where he looked, he spotted something goofy going on but whatever he was supposed to be seeing wasn't jumping out at him.

Maybe it was just a tape reflecting better times. Back when the theater was filled with happy partygoers and the park was open to the public. Ed had to admit, he was slowly getting more sold on the magic of the park. He could at least acknowledge that there was a reason Rambley was so desperate to get it back. Had Indigo Park stayed like he remembered, it could've been something amazing.

Ignoring the caged mascots and animal experiments, that is.

And just like that thought brought Ed back to reality, something in the footage changed.

It happened in an instant, but the crowd switched up. The happy faces and smiles suddenly turned to looks of shock. Children were screaming- he couldn't hear it, but he could see mouths opening and young faces scrunching. People shot up from their seats and started pushing their families into the aisle and towards the door, where they began to pile up in a crunch.

Something had frightened them on the stage, and they were willing to climb over each other to escape.

Wait, was this the incident that shut down the park? The one that Rambley vaguely talked about? The one he half-heartedly blamed on Lloyd?

“What did Lloyd do...?”

Ed focused his attention on the end of the stage and tried to see what was going on. He saw moving shadows and then a glimpse of Lloyd's tail, but he couldn't see enough to know what was happening.

Until blood splattered across the stage.

“Oh no...”

And then Lloyd’s head appeared. The top of it, for a second, crashing into the stage like something was holding him down.

“Wait.”

Lloyd turned back with a swing and Ed leaned in close and squinted, trying to see what was going on. Something was on the stage- was that fur? It almost looked like a clump of fur. Only visible because it looked bloody.

“Wait, is he... Is he fighting with someone?”

Something, not someone. Though Ed didn’t get a better glimpse than that, it looked a whole lot like Lloyd was fighting with something, and it couldn’t have been a human. It had to be another mascot, right? Maybe there was a second Lloyd? He really didn’t want to think that, but it would make a lot of

sense if they had backup animals for their performances.

But there was only one cage in the basement. Maybe it was a mascot from somewhere else in the park? Heck, it could've been Barlow. He was almost as big as Lloyd. He fit the bill of something that would run into a packed house and chomp down on the first cat-like thing it saw. That would make sense...

Ed rewound the tape to try and get a better look, but he couldn't. He could just see the panicked faces of the guests, the blood splatter, the edge of a scuffle, and then static when the tape finally ran out.

It could've been Barlow, but Ed had a feeling in his gut that it wasn't, and that he had just witnessed something a lot worse than it seemed. That HAD to be the incident that shut down the park.

But that didn't make sense, did it? Sure, that would lead to major lawsuits and a lot of trouble from animal activists, but how would Lloyd getting in a

fight on stage lead to everyone abandoning the park? Okay, maybe they would leave because a wild lion was on the loose, but nobody ever came back. And surely, they could've tranquilized him- they somehow sedated Panko, why not Lloyd?

Something sure didn't feel right. Ed ejected the tape and stuck it back in his bag. He'd have to run this by Rambley later. As much as he wanted to protect him, not wanting to ruin Rambley's downright romantic image of the park, they needed to figure out what happened.

And the next step was getting into Mollie's room and seeing what he could find in there.

Ed walked all the way back to the examination room and found the door now open. He peeked inside before shining his light in. There was a dull light coming through from windows in the back. Though it wasn't enough to make much out without the flashlight.

He stepped inside and looked over the setup before him.

There was a square scale on the table with a little pedestal in the center and a boxy glass top, but nothing inside. To the left was a flat of empty test tubes lined up, an Indigo Park labeled centrifuge machine, and a microscope. A monitor sat to the right on the table, off.

It looked like they were weighing something and taking blood here, but everything was small. Maybe for baby animals? He searched around until he found some papers left out on a filing cabinet in the corner. Then he scanned the wall of text until he found something of note-

Egg-M5 has doubled in size over the last two days and is progressing at a faster rate than 4 and even 3. From this growth pattern we can assume that it will continue to increase in size until hatching, when the chick is estimated to stand in the vicinity of thirty to fifty centimeters high.

He was right about the baby animals, and from the word 'chick', the M, and the room-

"They grew Mollie in here..." he whispered.

Or at least, they weighed her and took her blood here. And from all the paperwork, this is probably where they saved the records on her creation.

Assuming that M5 was Mollie, which he really, really hoped, because he didn't like the idea of yet another Mollie running around. Let alone at least three of them. He continued looking and found more.

The success of R.org.2 has shown that pure growth through genetic splicing and incubation is not enough to yield desired results. The resulting mascots will always grow into their own genetic code while the new organic models with artificially enhanced neuro functions will stay closer to the desired designs without clashing between the Indigo Spark!light AI and the grown brains.

There was that name again. That had to be Rambley, R-2, the second body. The body that was new and being used as a guide.

But if Rambley was such a success then why did they leave him behind?

Ed yanked open the file cabinet and started to search through, looking for anything that stood out, briefly checking papers on which the words seemed to bleed together. Flipping and searching until-

He noticed a little gap and pushed the files back to reveal one thicker one. Looking inside he found a sturdy envelope and pulled it out. Except it wasn't an envelope, it was a sleeve, and inside was a silver disc.

Mollie 5 was written on the back along with a couple of dates. Either it was a bunch of virtual records, or... could this be the backup disc? If it was, it wasn't very impressive. It looked like a normal CD.

Ed turned it over in his hands. This could be it, right? Rambley hadn't said what the backup would look like and a disc made sense, but how could a whole AI be contained on a simple computer disc?

Maybe it was Indigo Park branded too, Ed thought with mild amusement.

Well, it was worth taking it anyways. Or...

He looked to the monitor on the desk. Maybe he could check for himself. He would be able to tell right away if it was just a disc with files on it.

He turned on the computer and this time it came on without a hitch- because it was plugged in and not sitting with a dead battery. The screen alit and a login screen popped up, with an Indigo Park logo as an avatar.

Of course it couldn't be that easy. Ed opened the disc drive on the tower and carefully removed and placed the disc in before closing it, trying to see if he could miraculously hop past the login screen.

It didn't work, to his disappointment and no surprise. He tapped his fingers on the desk as he eyed the screen, noting the 'Need a hint?' prompt beneath the bar that only just appeared. He clicked on it.

Nothing happened. He clicked it a few more times.

And then suddenly a very familiar head peeked up from the bottom left of the screen before hopping up into frame.

It was Rambley.

"Hey there, Buddy!"

"Rambl-?"

"Looks like you're having a little trouble with the password. But don't worry, Rambley's here to help! The password is four numbers. A VERY special day for a VERY special raccoon!" Rambley chirped.

An automated thing again. Except now it took the form of one of those little desktop helpers that would either be entirely unhelpful or sell your information to third party companies.

Ed assumed it meant Rambley's birthday, but that's where he hit a brick wall. Because he had no idea what Rambley's birthday was supposed to be. Was it a canonical date? The date he was created? The date the park opened? He only knew one of those.

He tried the date that the park opened to no avail.

"Whoops! That's not quite right. Are you sure you're really a Rambley fan?" Rambley said. He planted his hands on his hips and gave a playful grin. It was very real Rambley-like. "Don't worry. You've got one more attempt. Go for it!"

Ed had absolutely no idea. He started to get out his phone before noticing that the camera light on the computer was on. It was probably nothing, there probably wasn't anyone there to watch him.

...But it still made him uneasy, and he ducked down behind the desk before quickly pulling up the search engine on his phone and typing in 'What is Rambley the Raccoon's birthday'?

After a painfully long wait, the phone informed him that there was no service, much to his dismay. He sighed and sat up and found that in the time he had leaned down the screen glitched out.

"Oh, come on. Not now," he mumbled. He began to click the mouse. "Come on, come on."

After a few desperate clicks, the screen suddenly stabilized, somehow. Rambley reappearing off to the left, his hands on his cheeks.

"Aww, it looks like your session timed out! Sorry about that. If you would like to use the backup code, enter it now. If you do not have the backup code, it can be found in the observation landing on subfloor four."

"What the hell is it doing down there?"

Rambley gave him a big smile. He stared back.

Then it began to run through some various animations, doing the head bob from the railroad screen like it was waiting for something. Likely for Ed to input more.

It was clearly automated but for some reason Ed was becoming increasingly uncomfortable with it. Maybe it was just how none of this was the real Rambley that was throwing him off. He was so used to talking to someone that having something replicating that was uncanny.

He took the disc out of the tower and put it back into the sleeve and then carefully tucked it into his bag alongside the flash drive. He slung it over his shoulder and looked back at the screen.

The Rambley avatar was holding his chin with a thoughtful look. Eyes narrowed in scrutiny. A look he recognized from the screens and the real life Rambley.

That was... That was really weird. He had to get out of here.

He got up- not too fast, not when he felt like he was being watched- and left the room. He probably needed to just head back outside and show the disc to Rambley, to make sure it's what they needed.

But speaking of Rambley... Maybe he could find a few more answers before he left. He turned towards the door that would lead to the research room dedicated to him.

Or maybe not, because the door was still closed tight. And he knew it was the right room because it had the Rambley poster outside it. It had never unlocked, so obviously it wasn't just the lockdown that held it shut.

A quick look at the check-in sheet showed that it was almost filled with a variety of various initials, all within very close times of each other.

Considering all the research circulating this R-2, which Ed was still convinced was Rambley's current body, he wasn't shocked to see so many workers in and out of this door. That was probably why it was locked tight.

He wondered if Rambley had been raised from a baby. From all the stuff on artificial brains being grown and from what Rambley said, it didn't sound like it, but he got a cute mental image of a baby Rambley.

He'd been watching too many baby raccoon videos. He blamed Rambley for that. He kept finding them left on the search engine on his phone.

He considered scouring the other rooms, but that weird feeling of being watched was still there. Besides, he needed to go run this CD by Rambley before he kept wandering around.

He started heading back to the security office, keeping a close eye out as he did. Something just

felt different as he walked up to the door leading to the security office.

He looked back over his shoulder as he turned the handle.

The handle didn't budge and he ran his shoulder right into the door with an 'omph'.

"What? Oh, wait." He used the Royal Rangler cuff and tried again, but the handle didn't budge. Either it had spontaneously locked behind him or the handle suddenly got stuck.

Maybe he had brushed off the idea that Salem was down here too quickly, because it felt like someone was messing with him.

With not much else to do, he turned on his heel and hiked all the way back down the halls, through the operation theater, further through the winding facility, back through the lobby, through the windowed halls, and back to the delivery chute.

He slipped his bag off and leaned down to push it through-

-and found a face staring back on the other side.

“Oh shhhhoot...” Ed stretched out as he just as quickly realized that it was the cartoony flat face of a cutout.

Someone had propped up a Rambley cutout in front of the other side, perfectly sized for its eyes to be peeking through at him.

Okay, he was definitely getting pranked by someone, and that someone was likely Salem. He sighed and pushed his bag in before crawling in behind it. He pushed it through, pushing the cutout over, and carefully maneuvered himself to climb out afterwards.

He looked down at the cutout which he reluctantly had to step on while getting out of the chute while he put on his bag. Then he picked it up and propped it on the opposite wall. Good enough, he guessed. He

turned to leave, hoping that there wouldn't be any more tricks waiting for him.

...Wait a second.

Ed tilted back the Rambley cutout and stared at it a little longer. It looked exactly like the one up in the offices, but was it? He hadn't seen any other cutouts like it, especially not in the labs.

He couldn't be sure that it was unless he went up and checked, but he wasn't sure if he wanted to. He would've much preferred to just get out of here before Salem decided to turn up the heat.

He headed back down the halls all the way to the stairwell and headed inside, beginning to climb the stairs-.

“Hey Buddy!”

Ed jumped and looked down with a start. Then slowly leaned over the railing and looked down

through the middle space in the dark stairwell. There was a light coming from the bottom floor.

“Rambley...?” he asked in confusion.

“There you are! Hey Buddy!” Rambley called up.

Ed relaxed significantly. Rambley came in looking for him. He shouldn’t have, he was putting himself at risk just being in here, but a little part of Ed was glad to not be alone. He started down the staircase.

“Hey, I think I found something,” he said.

Rambley didn’t reply.

Ed hesitated on the steps.

He stood there for a long second. Then he began to creep down the stairs a little more cautiously. He held back the urge to call out and instead waited out, trying to look between the railings. It was hard to see because the third and fourth subfloor landings’ lights were out.

It wasn't until he was at the last landing before the bottom that he was able to see where the light was coming from.

It was from a large yellow flashlight that was sitting on the floor pointing towards the stairs. Sat right beside the door so someone could've maybe mistaken the light as coming from there. The door was propped open, with part of a dark hallway wall visible inside.

But what caught Ed's attention right away was what the door was propped open with.

Tapes. At least twelve or more tapes stacked up and laid out. Even stuffed inside of a duffle bag that was used to prop open the door halfway. So many security tapes that promised hours of footage.

And Ed's heart dropped into his stomach, because he knew it was a trap.

He slowly took a step back and up the stairs, trying to move so slowly that he couldn't be heard at all.

He froze up when a voice echoed through the open door below.

“Hey Buddy!”

Now that he was closer, he could pick up the light fuzz and realized it was another automated voice. Something was using an automated voice to call up to him. It wasn't his Rambley.

He continued to carefully make his way to the next landing before, after hearing nothing, turning and beginning to walk properly up the steps. And then got to the third landing before picking up speed and starting to bound up them like he was getting chased by security. Honestly, he would've rather run from security.

It felt like there was always something right behind him, but there wasn't.

He rushed past the second floor door, up the steps to the next landing, and then right as he was going up the next, the stairwell suddenly went dark. Ed began to mumble panicked words under his breath as he scrambled to get out his flashlight while still trying to climb stairs in the dark. He got it out and on and raced up the last few flights.

His heart was pounding, his lungs were tight, and he ran up to the electronic door and grabbed the handle-

And ran face first into it when it didn't turn.

He recovered quickly, frantically trying to turn the handle to get the door open, but it didn't budge. He had a moment of clarity and found the Critter Cuff reader beside the door, and held the Royal Rangler cuff up.

But it didn't do anything because the power was off. He was trapped.

"Oh no..."

A rather underwhelming thought for a disastrous situation. He tried to ram the door with his shoulder with one firm hit, but it became clear instantly that it was too secure to break in. He wasn't getting out.

Somewhere deep in the stairwell he heard the clatter of the tape pile falling over.

Now he was in complete panic. He got out his phone and tried to dial Laura, but when it was answered there was nothing but crackling despite the fact he had talked with Rambley in the stairwell.

He couldn't tell if it was his heart pounding in his ears or if he was hearing footsteps thump up the stairs beneath him.

Wait, wait. He didn't need to get a call through. If they were answering, then he had some service. He quickly typed up a text.

E: Locked in basement stairs need help quick

He watched it desperately and saw when it was sent, but that didn't spare him the agonizing wait to see if they got it. He could only stand there in the dark with his flashlight angled down the stairs, waiting for someone to show up.

...

...

He was definitely hearing someone on the stairs.

They were moving quietly, like he had when he was trying to sneak away, but they were clear now. And they were closer.

He had to look. He shined the light past the railing towards the lower set of stairs, but there was nothing there. He then leaned over the rail to look down between the stairs.

It stared back with glassy orb eyes and hollow stretched smile.

Ed lurched backwards and hit the wall hard, staying flat against it as his pulse doubled. His hand was shaking so badly that the light was bouncing, but was forcibly aimed down the stairs, as though the only thing keeping it away.

Except it wasn't, because he heard the footsteps again. Creeping closer, boldly closing in closer, and closer, and...

The stairwell door was pulled open with a small 'oof' of effort from Laura. Before she could get so much as a "Hey" out, Ed came charging through into the lobby hallway and suddenly slammed the door shut. Yanking it right out of Laura's hand as she stood there blinking. "Uh, you okay?"

Ed looked at her with wide, wild eyes and a, "We've gotta go," and that was all the clarification she needed.

While the power was out up here too, it was easy to see with the light pouring through the windows. Ed ran for the front doors, which were still open.

Rambley stood right outside, hands clasped worriedly, but he perked up with a smile as he saw Ed coming

“There you are! Gosh, I was afraid you- Hey, whoa, whoa! Where are we going?!”

“I’ll tell you on the train!”

Ed didn’t even stop. He just grabbed Rambley’s hand and kept going, half-dragging the shorter behind him.

It didn’t take them long to get back to the tram at that pace and Ed all but threw himself in. Laura right behind him, and Rambley getting the cue to start the tram. They were moving shortly after.

Finally, Ed could breathe- gulping in oxygen to feed his still pounding heart. He hunched over with his hands on his knees and tried to slow it down.

“Was something chasing you? Is that what happened?” Laura asked worriedly.

“Let me just...” Ed panted. “Let me just catch my breath...”

“Good idea, Eddie. You just take all the time you need,” Rambley said calmly- freaking out on the inside but covering it well.

Ed only took a few more seconds before he pulled off his backpack and dug inside.

“Whatcha looking for?” Rambley asked.

He was answered by Ed whipping out a disc sleeve and handing it to him.

“Is this her?”

“Is this... You mean Mollie? This?”

“I found this in the lab that I think they grew Mollie in. I found these papers talking about eggs and one was called M5, Mollie 5, like it says on this. And

there was stuff about replacement bodies- it's a long story, but do you think this could be her?"

"I... I don't know..." Rambley took the CD in his hands as though it itself was a fragile little egg. "I'm not entirely sure what the backups look like, but it does sound like... And these dates. It looks like this copy was made right before the park closed. If they were creating more bodies and this was made then, this could be- this has to be..."

He kept studying it with scrutiny for a while longer before his eyes widened in realization, and he broke into a beaming grin.

"This has to be her! It just has to! The dates make sense, it was in the room where they put her together- it was the only one?"

"It was the only one."

"Then it IS her! This is it, Eddie! All of Mollie is contained in this tiny little disc!"

Rambley looked back at Ed with eyes filled with adoration and an excited smile.

“How am I ever going to replay you?!”

Ed chuckled a little tiredly. “You don’t have to replay me-.”

“Oh, come’ere!”

Rambley leapt on Ed and gave him a one-armed hug. His other arm sticking out to hold the CD away, but his tail making up for it by curling around Ed. The overwhelming softness was comforting.

“You’re the best, Eddie,” Rambley murmured.

Ed returned the embrace and squeezed him tight.

“Thanks, Buddy.”

He was glad that Rambley was temporarily distracted because there were a lot of questions he didn’t want to ruin the mood answering. Such as why

he bolted out of the building like that. Laura was 'aww'ing at the scene, but Ed knew she was going to be bombarding him with questions the second he was let go.

He would tell them he saw something. He couldn't bear to tell Rambley what.

The important part was getting as much distance between them and the labs as possible.

But that was okay! Because for now at least, they didn't have any plans to come back. Maybe Rambley would eventually start asking about Finley, but they'd cross that bridge later. He'd worry about that next time.

He would be prepared next time.

...

Unaware that the next time would be a lot sooner than he was expecting... It was a sunny day and Rambley was sitting in a quaint little garden wishing

he could go inside a big, dark, cold building. Talk about an out of character moment.

But he couldn't help it. While Rambley should've been happy that he hadn't needed to go inside- there were a lot of unchecked feelings that he knew would crop up once he started poking around in there- he couldn't help but feel like he was missing out. He wasn't even able to connect with the cameras to look around! He could just sit here like a bump on a log waiting for Ed to come back.

Well, that and some light chatting with Laura, which was broken up by whenever Ed checked in.

Rambley was currently waiting for Ed to get back with him. He sat there with the phone to his ear listening carefully as Ed walked around looking through stuff. It took him everything in his willpower to not start bombarding Ed with questions.

"Whatcha looking at?"

"Is that paper rustling? What's it say?"

"Ooo, I hear a zipper! Find something neat?"

It would've been one thing if he was talking through an intercom, but with the phone he knew Ed would constantly have to lift the phone up to listen and reply and it seemed like that could get annoying fast. If there was one thing Rambley didn't want to do, it was to be an unnecessary distraction while Ed was trying to find something vitally important.

He would just have to keep his rambles to himself.

But thankfully, Laura decided to strike a conversation again. Though it took an unexpected turn.

“So... what's the deal between you and Ed?”

Rambley was blindsided by the question. He looked at Laura curiously.

“What deal?”

“Like, you know.” She made a vague hand gesture.

“You and him.”

Rambley stared at her for a long second trying to read the suggestion before smiling.

“Eddie’s my best friend! And I’d like to think I’m his too, buuut I’ve got some competition,” Rambley said. He playfully elbowed Laura’s side.

“Well, duh. I figured that out. You know what I mean,” she said.

He wasn’t sure that he did. She was smiling, so she wasn’t implying anything bad, and she certainly wasn’t implying, well, that, so she must’ve just been curious for curiosity sake.

And it occurred to Rambley that he currently had someone to talk to who wasn’t Ed. So, he could say things he wouldn’t say to Ed, and there was one thing that did sort of weigh on his mind.

“Welllll, there IS one thing,” he confessed.

He carefully covered the bottom of the phone with his palm before tucking it into his lap, making absolutely sure Ed wouldn't hear a word.

"Sometimes I worry that Ed kind of just sees me like his little buddy and not really like... y'know, another human. I mean, I'm not a human, but in here and in here-." He pointed to his head and then slapped his hands over his heart before quickly covering the phone again. "I'm just as human as anyone else! And I... I don't mind being Eddie's sidekick, just as long as he doesn't... see me as one...?"

"He doesn't think that! I mean, maybe you'd make like the perfect talking animal sidekick in a magic princess movie or something, but Ed's no princess."

"He's a princess in my heart," Rambley said sugar-sweetly. Then he gave her a deadpanned look. "Don't give me that look. You know I'm kidding."

"Suuure."

“Are you sure? That he doesn’t see me like a super-smart pet or something. Do you guys ever talk about me?”

“All the time! All good stuff. He worries about you a lot.”

“Aww, Eddie.” Rambley smiled. “What’s he so worried about?”

“The usual. You being alone, the whole wild dog situation. Y’know, before he started doing the whole skirting the law “let’s break into an abandoned school!” thing, he used to be a worrywart. But that’s because he cares.”

He did care, a whole lot. Not just anybody would go scour an entire laboratory to look for a backup disc, let alone to the park return after getting chased by as many feral mascots as Ed had.

Rambley cared too. He worried about Ed just as much as Ed worried about him, but for different reasons.

“...Can I ask you something that you absolutely cannot tell Ed no matter what, cross your heart?”

“Sure thing!” Laura chirped.

She seemed excited. What exactly did she think he was going to ask?

“It’s just... Did something happen to Ed’s mother? We’ve talked about her a few times, and he always gets a sort of sad look when we do.”

The way all that excitement vanished from Laura’s face already gave him part of the answer.

“Uh, well. Did he tell you about his family?”

“Just how much him and his mom loved the park.” He could see how torn she looked and started to second-guess himself. “...You know what? Don’t worry about it! If Ed wanted me to know, I’m sure he’d tell me!”

“He probably will. It’s just a little... complicated...”
Laura managed to hold out for a few seconds before caving. “So, there was a sort of disagreement in the family and Ed’s not that close to them anymore. He still sees them. Heck, we’re going to have Thanksgiving with them in like a week, but he doesn’t get to see his mom as much. I think the rift kind of made it hard to visit.”

“I had no idea. Gosh, and I kept bringing her up...”
Rambley said guiltily. He sighed. “At least she’s okay. I was worried she might’ve passed away.”

“No, she’s alive. It’s just tense.”

“I could imagine. But you’re going to see them for Thanksgiving? Maybe they could patch things up! After all, they wouldn’t have invited Eddie if they didn’t want him there. This could be the chance for them to repair those broken bonds and be thankful for what they have, each other!” Rambley said hopefully.

That was the first time he had seen Laura truly force a smile. To the point where he could easily tell.

Well, that answered that question.

“Maybe, but his parents always invite us over. It’s sort of the one time of year the whole family gets together despite their differences.”

“What about Christmas?”

“Sometimes Ed comes to see my folks, sometimes he just streams.”

That was heartbreaking. No family for Christmas? He supposed that his audience online might be a part of his family too, just like how Rambley considered park guests a sort of family, but it still seemed so sad.

He didn’t need to ask why Ed hadn’t told him. He already knew why he wouldn’t. It felt like a breach of trust even asking about it now.

Poor Ed. He deserved better than to work on Christmas, even if he did enjoy his job. Maybe he could do something about that.

“Well... Well, good! I was tired of spending Christmas by myself anyways. He can even help me find the good decorations,” Rambley said, putting on cheery tone to try and steer the conversation back.

“Yeah!” Laura agreed, doing the same. “Wasn’t there a Christmas parade or something?”

“Oh no, there wasn’t A Christmas parade. There was THE Christmas parade! And let me tell you, it was incredible!”

And then the conversation trailed off into that for a while. Both making a considerable effort to act like they hadn’t been talking about anything else. Rambley didn’t even dare steer it back to get more assurances.

It was some time after that when Ed escaped the stairwell and went sprinting out of the labs with an uneasy look and a backpack full of spoils.

But it was worth it. It was totally worth everything Ed had gone through to get that little disc.

Rambley hadn't even done anything with it yet, he was just so overwhelmingly ecstatic. On the train home he talked all about the Mollie he remembered, telling stories that Ed knew were from cartoons, and even going through plans going forward- fixing up Jetstream Junction, bringing more screens into his house so that Mollie could hang out, stuff like that.

He even briefly mentioned them looking for a body for Mollie back at the labs.

“If this one was number five, then there's gotta be four more bodies somewhere! Maybe Mollie could get inside one. I don't care if she doesn't look exactly like I remembered, I just want to hug my bestie again. Other than you, Eddie- but you can hug me anytime!”

Rambley's outright flirtatious little wink was almost distracting enough to save him from how his stomach dropped at the mention of returning to the labs.

He really, really didn't want to go back. But he also didn't want to tell Rambley why, and because of that Ed knew in the back of his mind he was going to sign himself up for a second visit.

And he went along with it with a dumb smile and not a peep.

With Laura having not gotten the chance to go in and still wanting something to do, Rambley suggested taking her, Ed, and Mollie- which was the disc, of course- to Jetstream Junction.

There he showed them around and started talking about plans to repair the place while Laura took pictures. Ed listened to all of the ideas dutifully, trying not to think about how impossible it all seemed.

Today had been a huge wake-up call and Ed was trying his best to cover up how shaken he was. Rambley didn't seem to notice- good.

"I know it looks a little... rough... but we can fix it. This place is going to look incredible when we're all done," Rambley said.

Ed thought he was talking to him- Laura was off taking pictures, so he couldn't be talking to her- but then he realized that he was instead talking to the disc. Talking to Mollie.

That should've been cute, but instead it sort of hurt. It hurt how equally lonely and optimistic Rambley was. It didn't matter how much time Ed filled, Rambley needed more. He deserved more, especially after the crazy stuff he saw in the labs and all he knew about what went down there.

He didn't think he'd ever be able to ask him about the operating room at this rate.

He had a really bad feeling that... that it was going to get in the way of any efforts to rebuild the park. That even the flimsy plans they had were just wiped away.

But he didn't want Rambley to know that, and he sure didn't want to think about it.

"...You know what we should do?" Ed asked. Rambley looked to him. "We should make a parkour section to Mollie's Landing Pad. A real parkour section, not just whatever I did. We could section it off, put more jumps in it, maybe put up some monkey bars. It doesn't have to be just for little kids."

"That is an excellent idea!" Rambley perked up considerably. "Actually, the Landing Pad was intended to be fun for the whole family, but I don't blame you for thinking it was just for little kids. I think a lot of guests thought that. Guess that meant some really young kids were making some seriously big jumps, yikes."

"Everyone's got to start somewhere."

“True! And better here with Indigo Park’s excellent medical staff on hand!... Note to self, rehire medical staff.”

Ed chuckled a little at that.

“Think we could get Laura on-board? She seemed pretty quick on the draw during my mini-medical emergency,” Rambley pointed out.

Had that thing in the labs done that to Rambley?

“Sure! We’ll have to wait until she gets her license though,” Ed said, pushing back the intrusive thoughts.

Rambley smiled and for a split second he saw that face in the back of his mind- but then Rambley’s eyes seemed to light up and it pulled him out of it.

“Mollie’s going to love it! Ooh, I just can’t wait until she gets to see this place for real!” Rambley said.

He looked around at the worn-down building and his ears drooped. “On second thought, maybe I could.”

“So, how do we upload her? That’s what we’re going to do, right?” Ed asked.

“Yup, that’s the plan! But not yet. Not until I know how to do it right.” He looked down at the disc, seeing himself reflected in it. “I have one chance; I can’t blow it.”

Maybe that was for the best until things were a little safer around here. Speaking of which-

“Hey, Laura! Where’d you go?” Ed called.

“I’m here!” Laura called from somewhere above. Both man and raccoon craned their heads up to try to see her. “Hold on, I’m coming down!”

“Maybe it’s best if when DO wake Mollie up we don’t mention the state of Rooftop Races,” Rambley said with a lopsided smile. “We’ll just say it’s... in need of renovations.”

“Major renovations.”

“Maybe leave that part out too.”

Laura came down the steps and strode back to them, holding up a plush dog she must’ve found upstairs. It looked like a poodle.

“I found a lost puppy,” she joked. “Who is this? I don’t remember a poodle!”

Now Ed considered himself well-versed in Indigo Characters by now, but he didn’t recognize the poodle. It didn’t match the theming or style of the other plushies either.

“Doesn’t look like an Indigo character I’ve ever seen,” Ed said.

“That’s because it’s not. Gosh, it must’ve just barely missed the trash can,” Rambley said with a sly little smile that made it clear that he knew what he was saying. “I guess someone must’ve found a new

friend at the park and decided to leave it behind for someone else to find. But I guess nobody wanted it, what a shame!”

“Aww, come on. That’s mean.” Laura hugged the toy protectively, exaggeratingly. “He’s cute!”

“You’re welcome to give him a good home.”

“As a matter of fact I will!”

“Good.”

Rambley might’ve actually sounded a teensy bit annoyed there. From the look on Laura’s face she noticed, and was looking a little bit cheeky.

Huh. Maybe leaving these two alone together was a recipe for disaster in the making.

Or maybe it would just be really funny. Who knows.

They then headed out- Well, no. Then they went into Mollie’s Landing Pad so Rambley could show off

how good he was at doing cartwheels. In a bizarre twist of fate, Rambley was weirdly good at doing cartwheels. Then they left Jetstream Junction and continued along.

Ed was starting to feel better even though he was constantly watching his back. Whether it be from Salem, Barlow, or anything else. Though nothing showed up, likely because they headed to the square around Rambley's treehouse.

In a moment that had Ed raising his eyebrows, Rambley guided them into a giftshop on a very obvious 'whim' and started showing Laura some of the remaining plushies. Laura must've caught on, as she was suddenly very cuddly with that dirty, old poodle toy, much to Rambley's chagrin.

It became very clear that Laura wouldn't take the bait. But Rambley's pouting was short lived. It was as though whenever he remembered the disc he was carrying around all of his cares were washed away.

A sharp contrast to Ed who couldn't help seeing that disc and remembering what it took to get it.

Time passed. They had planned to leave around sunset, but now Ed was starting to second-guess this decision. He sure didn't want to be here at dark, but he wasn't nearly as sure about leaving Rambley alone.

"Are you sure you want to be alone tonight?" Ed asked.

"Well, of course I don't WANT to be alone, but it's a streaming night! You've got your setup at your house and all your fans waiting for Ensign himself to play another spooky game. You go do that. Besides-!" He held up the disc with a toothy grin. "I'm not alone anymore!"

"I guess so. If you're sure, but keep my phone."

"Gladly!" Rambley eagerly accepted it. "I'll take good care of it!"

He stayed at his treehouse and followed them out of the park through the screens, where he was especially animated today. He didn't put on a show with another song, but there was a sing-song chirp to his voice. It was one of the first times in a long while that he didn't seem nervous or a little sad as Ed left.

It made Ed feel a lot less guilty for running off before it got dark.

He and Laura made it to the car and got in. He started it up, and Laura started where she left off at the labs.

"Alright, now we're alone. Rambley's home, he's cozy, he's happy. We're leaving," she said. "...What happened?"

He should've expected that. She had let it drop way too easily.

"Uh..."

“You saw something. I know you, Ed, and you don’t run like that unless there’s a reason. So, spill it.”

Ed sat there for a moment. He inhaled deeply, exhaled, started to back the car up, and began.

And he told her everything he remembered. The paper, the theater, the tape, and it.

It wasn’t until they were driving down the highway sometime later that he finished.

“And then the door opened, and you were there, and we ran out,” Ed said. “...So, what do you think?”

Laura was silent. She blinked out of her daze. “I- Wow. That’s... Wow.”

“I know...”

They were quiet for a second. Then Laura shot up in her seat.

“Ed, you can’t leave him alone if that thing’s running around!”

“I know. I didn’t want to... But he’s been there for years and never saw it. It must’ve stayed in the labs this whole time.”

“And what if we let it out?!”

“I don’t think so. I just... I don’t know, but it looked like it shut off the power. If it did that, it could’ve let itself out.”

A sentiment that didn’t sit well with either of them.

“...Maybe I’ll come back later.”

“You better. I would, but I’ve got to get up early tomorrow,” she lamented. “You know, I saw stuff in Salem’s house like that. There was a paper that looked like it said vax on it, like vaccine, and they had chemicals in their fridge and was washing needles.”

“Really? Do you think they’re infected?”

“I don’t know, but they don’t act like that... Wait- BUT, it did say Lloyd on that paper! It could be Lloyd, he could be infected!”

That actually made a lot of sense.

“And maybe Salem’s trying to make medicine? Make a vaccine, BUT that’s not how it works? That’s not how you make a vaccine,” Laura said in mild confusion.

“How do you make a vaccine?”

“You weaken a virus until it can be easily handled by the immune system and the immune system makes antibodies to react to it. It’s high school biology!”

“Yeah, I slept through most of that.”

She rolled her eyes. “Okay, true, but most people would know that.”

“Most people who went to school. Unless Salem found a guide to viruses at the labs, they probably don’t know that.”

“...Good point. I didn’t even think about that.”

There was a brief pause.

“By the way, I told him about your family,” Laura said apologetically. “Sorry.”

Ed’s head snapped to her with a look of horror.

“What did you tell him?”

“Not much! I just told him about how you’re not close to your parents anymore.”

“Oh, okay.” Ed exhaled. “I thought you meant you said something about- you know.”

“No.”

“Thanks.”

“Are you going to?” she asked knowingly.

After a few seconds Ed shrugged.

“You know you should.”

“I know. I will.”

Funny. He had gotten on Rambley for hiding things and here he was doing the same thing. He’d have to figure out an easy way to break all of it to him, including all he saw in the labs.

But not tonight. Tonight, Rambley could be happy with Mollie. He deserved a win.

Ed smiled a little. “He got pretty peeved at that poodle toy.”

“Oh my God, YES! He got so grumpy!”

The conversation stayed lighter after that.

Once Ed dropped Laura off at her place he headed home to his own. He took a quick shower, got changed, ate some, and then got ready for the stream.

Streaming was a good escape from everything. For a couple of hours, he was able to get lost in what had to be the dumbest game he had ever played. With a chorus of voices all cheering him on.

Or well, no, most of them were memeing on the game, but that felt encouraging too. It felt normal and familiar, and Ed needed a little of that.

But that little bit ran out when he finished. When he leaned back in his office chair, stretched, considered what he was going to do next, and suddenly remembered the flash drive.

Now that he had taken some time away from it, he found his curiosity returning. He plugged it into the tower and pulled it up on the computer.

Strangely enough, the flash drive only had a single file on it, a video file that he was able to open with his video player.

The video looked to have been taken by a park guest, not by a phone but by a camera or camcorder. The date in the corner, September 30th, 2015, made it clear that it wasn't long before the park shut down.

The footage lasted about twenty minutes and for most of it, it was just a family spending a day at Indigo Park. Riding rides, eating food, taking footage of their kids climbing on the play areas- just enjoying the park. Nothing spectacular or mind breaking.

Ed watched it all and absorbed it like a sponge. A little smile on his face as he saw the park as he remembered it and watched a happy family enjoy it.

He really had to show this to Rambley. He could already imagine how he'd gush over the kids running around in their Rambley ears. He'd get a real kick out of it.

The footage jumped around only a little. Largely just cutting out any time the family stood in a line or when they went in to get a meal at Alice's Malt Shop. But it was a cohesive step by step of their entire journey. They even visited rides that Ed had totally forgotten about, unlocking memories that he didn't realize were there.

Then they found themselves in a very familiar square, walking towards a very familiar tree house.

He realized they were going to see Rambley and instantly his stomach dropped. His heartrate quickened as they walked up to the fence and the treehouse door opened to greet them.

And what came through was the real Rambley. Bright-eyed and bushy tailed, literally, with a pleasant smile and a neatly tucked bandana. Greeting the family, and the camera, with an eager wave.

Ed's heart downright leapt a little at seeing him. He relaxed instantly, maybe preemptively.

The whole marketing department was going on about the new Rambley mascot and trying to advertise him. Of course this video would be in some manager's office- they were probably trying to make a commercial or something and got one of the workers to take his family to the park. It showed off almost everything and would end with them meeting the real Rambley the Raccoon.

He greeted the children and even gave them both a hug, though Ed noticed before and after the hug he kept a clear distance between them. He wrung his hands a little; he was nervous. But he was smiling, and Ed could tell it was real. Even back then he was so eager for attention and contact.

Ed didn't consider why the footage only had about twenty seconds left. Not until-

"What is that?" the mother said. A pause, she repeated more insistently, "Donald, what IS that?"

For a second Ed thought they meant Rambley, and he felt a little sick, anticipating some sort of freaked out reaction on the horizon. Like they finally realized he wasn't just a robot.

But then the camera turned towards the buildings to the right and the little gap between the gift shop and the-

Oh God.

Oh... dear God.

There, standing in that crack between the buildings was what he had been dreading when the treehouse door opened.

It was the other Rambley.

The mascot Rambley with the empty eyes and the stretched smile. Its fur now patchy and its bandana dangling from the red collar that was supposed to secure it on. Staring at them.

There was a shout from the man and the elongated creature turned and disappeared. When it moved its boney back moved unnaturally, and it moved so quickly it almost looked like it vanished.

The camera bounced and the man swore under his breath. For a second Ed could see his Rambley on the camera, looking confused and concerned. Then he saw a park attendant appear in frame as the camcorder turned, but it was then lowered as the man and woman began to explain. The father gave a “Hold on” before the footage abruptly stopped and the video ended.

Ed stared at the paused first frame of the video. He realized he had been holding his breath through the end of it.

He didn't really want to, but he skipped ahead and watched it again. And again. And he paused it to try to get a better look.

There was no doubt in his mind now. Its strange movements, it's speed-

“That’s how it got up the stairs so fast.”

But that wasn’t the only thing he noticed.

It was hard to tell with its eyes, but he subtly noticed when the man shouted that it slightly snapped its head towards him. It had been initially staring at the children and Rambley.

It had been staring at Rambley.

It knew where he was.

It knew where he lived.

And the only thing keeping it from him was a singular basement door.

And Ed wasn’t even sure that it locked behind him.

Ed shot up from his office chair and bolted. Grabbing his keys, his bag, and barreling out the door, barely stopping to lock it back.

He could only hope he wasn't too late.

Rambley's evening consisted of three things: Ed's stream, Indigo Cartoon reruns, and a bowl of Rambley Rations. All in all, pretty good!

He was currently watching 'Soaring Winged Wonders' with Mollie at his side, sat on a pillow comfy and safe. He had talked to her through the entirety of the stream and cartoon watching, knowing good and well that she couldn't hear him, but it made him feel better to treat her like a real person. After all, she was! Just stuck in a disc.

Sure, it felt a little weird, but he had been stuck in a disc like that too, hadn't he? And he came out alright!

Someday she'd be sitting beside him on the couch watching them with him. He couldn't wait for that.

He chuckled at an admittedly dumb pun Mollie delivered on the television when he suddenly felt something weird. Just a strange feeling. Like someone was walking around nearby- had he heard something?

He turned his head and listened, pausing the television so that he could hear. He didn't hear anything at first, but then he heard something that sounded like footsteps. Nearby footsteps by his fence.

Suddenly, something tried to open his front door. Then started to knock frantically.

Rambley jumped off his couch in a panic, freezing up before focusing to connect with the cameras. Was it Ed? Did he come back?

The knocking grew faster as he finally connected with the camera that could see the front door, seeing who was out there.

It was Ed.

Rambley breathed an exhale of relief and rushed over to greet him as he automatically unlocked the door. Ed came racing in so fast he almost ran right into him and shut the door quickly behind him.

“Whoa, Eddie, where’s the fire?! You blew in here like that ugly dog toy was on your tail!”

“Oh my God, Rambley, you have got to get over that. We’ve got way bigger problems,” Ed said in exasperation.

Rambley’s ears shot up in alarm. “Like what?”

“Promise me you’re not going to freak out.”

“Oh no.” Those ears pinned back as he got an uneasy look. “What is it?”

“The old- the mascot before you, your old body? Well, I found this thumb drive at the offices, and I didn’t tell you because I forgot, but I remembered when I got home. So, I put it into my computer and all that was on it was this video that was recorded by a family at the park before it closed and- and there was this scene and you were on it- I saw you on this tape! Video- it’s not important-!”

“Eddie, you have to slow down. You’re starting to hyperventilate,” Rambley said worriedly.

Ed managed to stop himself. Raising a finger to give him a second and taking a deep breath.

It wasn’t outside. It wasn’t outside. It wasn’t outside.

“Feeling any better?” Rambley asked.

With a still tense expression, Ed managed a thumbs up.

“Let’s wind it back a little. You found a flash drive with a video of me on it in the labs?”

“Yes, and not just you. Rambley-...” Ed swallowed thickly and forced it out. He had to. He couldn’t hide it. “I... I saw your old body on the video.”

“Wh...What?” Rambley was surprised but then looked a little sad. His eyes lowering to the floor and his shoulders slouching. “You saw that old thing, huh? *sigh* I told you it wasn’t pretty...”

“Rambley, no. I saw it AND you. Both of you.”

Rambley looked up with a start. “What? Wait, you mean-?”

“You were standing outside greeting kids and your old body- the tall, lanky one that looks like a costume- was standing over there between the buildings watching you. They got it on tape!”

The raccoon furrowed his brows and processed that for a long few seconds before he was slapped with a horrified look.

“Wait, are you saying...” His voice steadily grew in volume. “My old body was still running around even after I got the new one?!”

“Yes.”

“Oh no, oh no, oh no.” Rambley grabbed his head as he began to spiral. “No, no, that can’t happen, can it?”

“It’ll be okay-.”

“How is this okay?! A defective ME is running around out there! How’s that even possible when I’m HERE?!” Rambley asked.

“I don’t know... Wait, yes I do!” Ed said almost triumphantly. “When I was in the labs, I read all about the brain chips. The old models wouldn’t work right with the chips, they’d destroy the brain, so they

made new models with brains built to work with them. That's why you got a new body. And if that's true, and they took your chip out of the old body and put it in your new one, then the old body could maybe survive without it."

If that was supposed to assure Rambley it failed spectacularly. He looked utterly terrified, even though Ed left off a lot of the gory details.

"I-It could be..." he said, his voice low. "It could still be out there somewhere..."

And unfortunately, Ed knew it was.

"...Come on! Now! Quick!" Rambley grabbed Ed's arm and started to drag him across his house.

"Where are we going?"

"Into the basement!"

Rambley let him go to yank open the trap door and frantically waved him to get in. Ed wasn't sure if it

was necessary but whatever, he wasn't exactly feeling good either. He climbed in while Rambley rushed to grab the Mollie disc, then ran back, grabbing the handle for the trap door and pulling it down with him.

Rambley got the lights on quickly. By then Ed had found his way to one of the pillows and made himself comfortable. Odds were, he was going to be there for a while.

"O-Okay, that should, uh, give us a little distance. Just in case," Rambley said. He set 'Mollie' up on a nearby pillow before turning on the train, and then coming to sit beside Ed. He pulled his tail around himself, wringing the fur in between his hands. "And we've got a little entertainment."

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you earlier."

"Wha? No, it's okay! How could you have told me? I have your phone!... Upstairs," Rambley said, deflating.

“I’ll grab it later. But I meant that I found the flash drive.”

“That’s not a big deal. Don’t worry about it,” Rambley assured. His tentative smile faltered. “When you said it was watching me...?” he asked quietly.

Ed nodded. “You were greeting a couple of kids when the parents saw it standing between the buildings. Do you remember that?”

Rambley looked unsure.

“There were two kids who hugged you and the mom and dad saw something? Then a park employee came over?”

“I... I DO remember that, but I don’t remember seeing it, and nobody ever said they saw another me...”

He looked troubled about the whole thing. Ed gave him a pat on the back.

“We’re going to figure this out.”

“Thanks, Buddy.”

Figure what out? Neither really knew.

Things grew quiet after that. Both lost in thought, they watched the train circling the track.

Ed moved to lay on his stomach, pushing his bag aside so it wasn’t in the way. Rambley regarded him with a smile, but Ed didn’t notice.

It was at that time when Rambley finally realized that something was a little off with Ed. Thinking back, he had been a little quieter than usual. Not his typical quiet but engaged but often being distracted.

After what he found out in the labs, no wonder he was a little out of sorts. Gosh, he must’ve read all sorts of things. Who knows what he thought of Rambley now- especially with his creepy ex-body running around.

He still hadn't said what he was running from either. Had there actually been something down there or had he just been spooked by what he found?

Rambley reached out and laid a hand on his arm.

"Hey... Are you okay?" he asked.

Ed looked a little surprised.

"I'm okay. Why?"

"You've been kinda quiet ever since you came out of the labs. Heh, guess I know why now," he said sheepishly. "If there's anything bothering you, you can tell me. Anything! Any questions or concerns, or even general feedback on your little... adventure down in the labs today. Just if you want to! No pressure."

Ed smiled. "I know. Thanks, Buddy."

But then he didn't. He didn't tell Rambley what was bothering him, he just looked back at the train.

He looked a little sad too.

What could've upset him in the labs? He already knew about the brain chip, and it was before he saw the flash drive. It did look like a hospital down there, maybe that scared him?

And then another possibility crept up on Rambley. A growing suspicion on what could be bothering him. Remembering specifically how quiet he had been around Jetstream Junction...

Oh. He knew what it was.

"...I think I know what it is."

Ed looked to him again, mildly surprised. Rambley looked down at his lap.

"Eddie, I know fixing up the park isn't... Well, it's sort of a bit of a pipe dream. Bottom line is, I'd really like to reopen this place. But if we can't? That's... That's okay. Just as long as we can make a better place for

my friends and I to live. I'll be okay with that," he assured. He looked to him again with a small smile. "I know it's all really daunting, so don't think about the grand scheme. Just one victory at a time, and this-." He gestured toward the disc. "This was a big one."

It was weird hearing Rambley like this. It almost sounded out-of-character, but it was very sincere. At the very least, what he said took care of one of the biggest things on his mind.

Just focus on making the Park a safe home. It wasn't exactly an easy undertaking, but it was much more doable than getting the whole place in working order.

Ed relaxed a bit more and returned the smile. "I'll do everything I can," he promised.

"And you've already done so much already," Rambley added, his voice lower. "Thank you."

"No problem."

“It’s no problem, but it’s a big deal! I don’t think I’ve really told you how much I appreciate you, Eddie. I’m so glad you’re here. Not just because you’re helping me, but just for you being you. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. There’s nowhere I’d-.”

Rambley’s hand caught Ed under the chin and lifted his head.

“-rather be?” Ed asked.

Rambley answered with a small kiss to his temple.

Oh.

That was different.

In an instant something changed. It was hard to put his finger on it, but the best way to describe it would be like someone starting a conversation in a quiet room. A door had been opened. A topic brought up.

Just by one little smooch.

That and the look on Rambley's face, filled with trepidation.

"Was that okay...?" he asked quietly.

"Yes! It was good. Yup," Ed fumbled.

"Good!" Rambley drew back quickly and started to fiddle with his hands. "Gotta tell me if I start pushing boundaries."

"You didn't," Ed said more confidently.

Rambley gave him one last grin before fixing his eyes on the train as he internally melted in his own embarrassment. The confidence he showed in going through with it fizzled out. His tail tucked around him again and he began to absentmindedly comb at it, carefully evening out each stripe.

Ed realized he was staring and looked to the train as well. Watching it circle the track while his mind was a good foot away.

He couldn't have thought of that thing in the labs even if he wanted to.

Good. Ed was really wishing that he was driving back to Indigo Park today. He would've rather had his arms wrist deep in fountain funk, or even port-o-john funk. He might've even preferred going back down into the labs.

...Okay, no. The labs are where he would draw the line. But he would've eagerly scrubbed, blue-colored waste out of Rambley's green suit for hours to avoid coming to this.

But he couldn't. He had to come. Because it was Thanksgiving.

He wore a rust red polo shirt and nice, unscuffed jeans that he knew would probably get a comment from someone, but he really didn't want to go more formal than that. He already felt like he was putting on enough of a show with his hair nearly combed

and the smile he knew he'd be slapping on the second he headed inside.

Thank goodness other family members were coming this year, and thank God that Laura was able to make it again. Her folks were disappointed but understanding enough. He envied her for that.

She was currently in the passenger seat on her phone, which he didn't mind. He wasn't exactly chatty on a good day, but he was feeling too antsy to even try a conversation now. She understood and didn't pry.

After a long two-hour drive, they were finally pulling up to the house. A large eggshell-white house tucked into a well-kept suburb. The lawns all cut, and the hedges all trimmed. Smooth stones lead from the driveway up to the front door, and the driveway was filled with three additional cars- all SUVs. There was an autumn leaf wreath hanging on the front door.

This house. Even though Ed moved into it only at eleven years old, it never felt like a home. It always felt like he was waiting to go home, but he never did. He never saw his old room or his old friends again, save Laura.

“What about Grampa?”

“We’ll still get to see Grampa on the weekends.”

But that wasn’t true, was it? More like every other weekend. Then monthly. Then at holidays. And now no more holidays either.

But Ed was pretty sure that the move wasn’t the only reason for that.

He took a deep breath as he pulled in behind the other cars and turned his off. He looked at Laura and found her already watching him. She offered him a supportive smile.

“You need a couple minutes?” she asked.

He would've loved to stall longer, but the unfortunate truth was that he could see his mom standing at the bay window. They already knew he was here.

"No, I'm ready," he lied. He took a deep breath and swung open the car door, mumbling a, "Showtime," during the exhale.

"Hold on. Let me put on my phony baloney smile," Laura joked. She put on a playfully exaggerated grin and shot it to him over the top of the car.

Worked like a charm, got a little smile right out of him. She pointed at him, silent encouragement and assurance, and then began to walk with him to the front door.

Laura went in first, walking in with a cheery, "Hiiii!" to whoever was waiting inside. Thank goodness she came because she was going to be carrying this whole visit, Ed predicted. He swallowed his nerves and stepped in behind her, putting on a believable but tame grin.

The 'hi' turned out to be aimed towards his Aunt Rosie who must've seen them pulling up and came to meet them even before his mom could. Rosie was an incredibly easy-going woman. She looked a lot like his mom, save that she had her hair in a kinky perm and always tended to wear bohemian style clothing. Currently she wore a long light orange cardigan with dark orange geometric patterns embroidered in it.

And already had a wine glass in hand. This would make for a fun evening. Aunt Rosie only drank at holidays and whenever she did it led to a few new anecdotes being created.

She gave Laura an eager hug and hung onto her like she was the direct relation, much to Ed's amusement. He got in a quick hug in before his mother walked in. Her hair hung just beneath her shoulders and was lightly curled, and she wore an exceptionally soft-looking cream sweater with a diamond pattern and a pair of simple burgundy pants.

Something about seeing his mother always made him feel a weird nostalgic feeling. Something welcoming and warm, but also sad. Sort of like seeing Indigo Park in its heyday through old footage. Or maybe just seeing her reminded her of Indigo Park, and their memories there, and watching cartoons together, and how good of a mom she had been.

And how lousy of a son he was to dread seeing her.

She pulled him into a hug. “I was worried you weren’t going to make it,” she said.

She smelled like the same perfume she had for his entire life. Familiar and sort of sweet, like flowers. A general ‘mom’ smell, at least in Ed’s opinion. He returned the hug.

“Why?”

His mother didn’t clarify. She just hugged him tighter. “I’ve missed you. You need to come home more.”

“...I missed you too, Mom.”

And for a second it felt like he had finally come home.

Until she pulled back.

“Go say hi to your dad,” she coaxed.

Ed’s smile grew tighter. “I will.”

“Please?”

“I will. I’m going.”

She gave him a little push in the direction of the living room and Ed dragged himself in there. Laura was still stuck with Aunt Rosie, not that it would’ve changed much.

Uncle Shaun and Aunt Sarah must’ve been here too as their three kids- Chase, Austin, and Britany- were playing on the floor. Ed couldn’t remember their exact ages, but they were all under the age of ten.

Probably five, seven, and eight. All three were sitting on the floor playing with Legos while watching cartoons on the TV.

Uncle Shaun was his mother's only brother but was significantly younger. To the point where he seemed more like Ed's cousin than his uncle. Aunt Sarah was quiet but nice. He couldn't see them but later noticed that they were in the kitchen, unpacking stuff they had brought.

On the other side of the long living room standing by the bay window were two men chatting. One was a broad man with a bushy brown beard dressed in a comfortable sweater and jeans. He was silently listening and nodding along with the conversation. The other man was short and wearing a grey suit that seemed out of place for a family get together.

Ed recognized these two men well, naturally, and he walked over to them. He caught the tail end of their conversation.

“Everyone always went to late, great Ted Cunningham. But I knew Ted, and the only thing great about him was his appetite. All of his investments were sat behind lock and key. Sitting there, not doing anything. And he was constantly saving. Saving, saving, not making his money work for him. Wasn’t willing to lose a little money to make a lot more, so it didn’t make a dime- Hey, Kiddo! Look who’s here. God, you’re getting tall,” the shorter man greeted.

He quickly hooked an arm around him Ed’s shoulders despite the size difference. He gave him a firm pat on the arm.

The man greeted him like any friendly uncle who barely knew him would.

That was his dad.

The other man was Rosie’s husband, Uncle Kurt. He raised his can to him and started to ask him how he was doing but was quickly spoken over.

“You bring anything?” his dad asked.

“Uh, no.”

“Bring your appetite?” he asked, raising his brows in a joking way.

“Sure.”

“Atta kid. We’ve got a spread in there. Help yourself! So, back to Ted. I told this guy that if he really wants some good advice- Hey! I’m always here! And I’ll give it out without that air of superiority, you know what I mean?”

And with that, Ed was effectively let back off the leash. He stood there a few seconds longer to be polite- maybe to see if he’d get roped into the conversation- and when he wasn’t he turned and headed into the kitchen.

If Mom’s schedule was like it always was then he had twenty minutes or so before dinner began. No better time to go scrounging for a snack.

...

Thanksgiving had finally arrived! Not one of Indigo Park's biggest holiday celebrations, but it was a holiday nonetheless. Even if the only Thanksgiving based cartoon featured the absolute most annoying Indigo character of all time, even worse than Lloyd, Thomas the Tom Turkey.

Ugh. Good thing Thanksgiving wasn't a big holiday or he might've made it into being a mascot. Talk about a waste of perfectly good biomaterial and feathers.

But it was still a holiday! And that meant that Rambley needed to celebrate, so today he was going to pointedly not watch the Indigo Thanksgiving special and instead just marathon a bunch of Mollie episodes. It helped keep the illusion of his CD friend alive to hear her voice, and made the day feel a lot less lonely.

But what was a cartoon marathon without munchies? Today Rambley was going to indulge. He grabbed a bowl and his scoop and headed to his bag of rations, chatting with 'Mollie' as he pulled it open and reached inside.

"It might not be turkey and stuffing with all the fix-ins, but it's better than nothing! And it sort of tastes like cranberries if you really... hmm."

Rambley took notice of how far he had to reach into the bag. He had noticed it for the last few days but had been too distracted to really focus on it. He lifted the bag and shook it, finding it on its last dregs.

"Hmm, bag's getting low... Looks like it's time to go get some more!"

But did he really want to go out alone when that other him, that confused old body could be out there? He really needed to wait for Ed.

But did he really want to be so helpless that he needed Ed to hold his hand and accompany him to

get his own food? Not that he'd mind the hand holding part.

Well, it looked like his options were to either go hungry later or buck up and go get the bag by himself. When he thought of it like that, there really was only one option.

"Looks like we're going to have to pause this party, Moll. I need to run out and get some groceries," he said. He paused the screen with only the slightest twitch and headed into his curtained cubby to get changed.

There wasn't any real reason to wear his mocap suit but with the warehouse probably being even dustier than it was the last time he went, it was probably in his best interest to wear his work gloves, and a side satchel to carry Ed's phone in. After some consideration he also switched out his best bandana for a more scuffed up older one.

Then, after hiding Mollie under a pillow and checking the cameras outside carefully, he headed outside.

Indigo Park felt... eerily quiet. It wasn't. It was as quiet as it always was, but ever since what Ed said about that tape, Rambley hadn't felt nearly as comfortable walking around alone. But what else was new? Lloyd and Salem already had targets on his back, so what was one more?

Except that this one was his old body. One that was twice his size, super creepy, and knew exactly where he lived. It wasn't a pretty picture and just the thought made him look over his shoulder.

Since Ed had told him, he had been keeping close to the house and only leaving when Ed was there. Which was often, so it wasn't too big of a change up. Besides, he had Mollie now, so he felt obligated to stay close.

He didn't know what he'd do if he lost that little CD. Especially not if Salem got their grubby hands on it. What were the chances of Laura sneaking in a second time?

“Maybe not too low...” Rambley thought with a little grin.

The walk to the warehouse took ages due to Rambley stopping and checking the cameras every time a suspicious corner came up. But eventually he made it past the main street, behind the pretty façade, and into the narrow passage of backstage warehouses and garages that hid between the attractions. One of many hidden throughout the park.

He found his way into a familiar section of a familiar warehouse where the mascot supplies were stored away. Bags of dried slurry meant for Mollie piled up on the shelves while Finley and Salem’s sections were cleared out.

Lloyd’s exceptionally large shelves were half filled with tins of Lloyd Luncheon, which were basically oversized cans of cat food. Curiously there were a lot less than Rambley remembered. Either Lloyd had somehow learned to open tin cans, which he doubted, or Salem was plundering them. It was likely

Salem considering their supplies had been cleaned out.

Rambley made it to the back of the warehouse and perked up as he saw a pile of Rambley Ration bags stacked up together in the corner. There were at least seven left, and he breathed a sigh of relief seeing them.

It looked like all that rationing of the rations was paying off! He headed over to grab one.

...Huh... Something smelled a little musty in here.

And then he stepped into a cool puddle. The soft splash making his ears twitch.

“What the- oh... Oh no.”

The puddle was likely rainwater that had leaked in through the ceiling, due to the smell, the amount, and the significant water damage on the back wall. It had nearly covered the floor back here in an inch of water.

Which the food bags were currently sitting in.

“Oh no, no, no!”

Rambley bolted over and started to check the bags, hoping that they weren't the source of the musty smell. The bags should've been watertight, right? Sure, they looked like canvas, and the food was packed full of preservatives, but the bags had to be waterproof. They couldn't possibly be waterlogged. They couldn't possibly be the source of that moldy smell.

But much to his dismay, he pulled the first bag away to see that lower back of it had unbelievably been eaten away. The small amount of food that came out looked an off-brown green color and the rest of it was stuck in the back like a big clump. The whole bag was ruined!

He went through another; the clumps fell out. Then another; it tore down the side as he moved it due to

the weakened material. He tried to catch the rations by they were a strange, clumpy consistency.

“I-It could still be good!” Rambley sputtered. He brought the handful to his nose and sniffed it and immediately recoiled.

It didn’t smell bad, per say. It just smelled... moldy. So moldy that it made his head spin and his stomach clench. Something went terribly wrong with those preservatives; they bred something foul.

He dumped the clump and shook out his hand before pulling it to his chest anxiously, looking over the remaining bags. Then he continued on, searching through the rest of them.

In the end only the two at the top of the clump were left entirely intact. That meant more months of food, he certainly wasn’t going hungry today- on Thanksgiving of all days- but not nearly as many as he had anticipated. He initially thought he had a year or two left if he was very, very careful. But no

amount of belt tightening would stretch two bags for twelve months.

This was bad.

“O-Okay, don’t panic. I’ll just...” Rambley snapped his fingers with an idea. “I’ll just go check the emergency supply cache! That’s it! They had backup mascot food supplies squirreled away in there, and it’s just winter enough to start digging those nuts up!”

All at once the fear switched to hope. Of course, the emergency supplies! Heh, he was shocked he hadn’t gotten into them already. There was probably a whole warehouse just of just Rambley Rations alone! Kept safe and dry since they were hidden from the elements underground...

...

...Which meant he was going to have to head down into the tunnels to get to it, and really hope that they weren’t all flooded or caved in. They were sturdy, so

likely most of them were still standing, but dark, and dank.

Rambley sighed to himself before beginning to haul up one of the still intact bags onto his back.

He was going to need a BIG flashlight.

...

Since Ed had walked into the house he hadn't had much of an appetite. That changed as soon as they sat down for dinner.

His mother had gone all out. A large golden turkey that she likely got up before the sun rose to throw in, mashed potatoes covered in cheese and speckles of chives, a corn casserole that too was probably loaded with cheese, a sweet potato casserole as well covered in toasted marshmallows, another casserole of some kind that looked pretty good despite him not being able to tell what it was.

Everything looked like it could've come out of one of those home and living magazines. Not that it took away from the effort at all. Especially not when it smelled so good.

Whether or not his twitchy stomach would let him fully enjoy it though was another thing entirely.

He stepped in to help her set the table, which she appreciated. Laura might've helped too but she was still having trouble getting away from Aunt Rosie. She got a brief reprieve when everyone came to dinner.

"Sweetheart, you did a fantastic job on this spread," Ed's father said. He pulled her in around the waist and kissed her on the cheek, then sat at the head of the table. "Just look at that bird. You'd believe a bird like that'd cost eighty bucks."

Uncle Shaun did a double-take in the middle of sitting down. "You spent eighty dollars on this turkey?!" he asked, pointing at it in disbelief.

“I didn’t, but that’s the sort of deal you get when you’re willing to look. I got this for a clean forty. Forty.”

Ed’s mouth went tight.

It was a turkey. It was buying a turkey. Nothing special about that. He didn’t even cook it.

But he wasn’t sure why he really cared or why it was so important. It wasn’t, he realized.

After his father’s annual, “Good food, good drink, good God, let’s eat,” the food started to be divvied up between them, and the kiddie table set up in the kitchen at the breakfast nook.

Soon they were all digging into the meal and Ed was finally starting to relax. His mother’s cooking had a way of doing that and thankfully the conversation at the table was light.

Or it was until-

“So, Ed. How’s the world wide web treating you?”
Uncle Kurt asked.

And suddenly the spotlight was on him. He had to think fast and talk faster.

“Good! It’s going really good.”

Nailed it.

“I’ll tell you, it’s crazy what people can do on the internet nowadays. Tommy’s been making these tutorial videos to show people how to D-I-Y. He just passed five hundred subscribers.”

“That’s great. Could you send me a link?”

“I’ll tell him to.”

“Tommy’s a bright kid,” Ed’s father said. “You know, it seems like everybody today’s trying to make a fast buck online. And they are. We had a guy in just a couple of weeks ago whose been making a killing buying and reselling limited edition comics that he

finds off Ebuy. Seems like a pretty great deal, right? Well, it helps that he's the only one doing it, because once more people catch on then you've got two million kids buying and selling faster than he can get ahold of them. I've seen it before; the market oversaturates and the whole bottom drops out." He pointed a fork at Ed. "And that's why you always have a backup plan."

Ed grinned blankly.

"Now I'm not saying that you won't make money now. All I'm saying is that you got to prepare for the future," his father explained. "You did get a degree for a reason. Maybe it's time to start setting aside your job and working for your career. There's always entry level positions at Capitech. But don't expect any special treatment," he said with a chuckle and a playful shake of his finger.

It felt fake. It felt like a used car salesman was offering him a lemon, not his father offering him a position at his company.

But Ed wasn't the type to argue even if they weren't being watched by a group of people. He just smiled.

"Thanks, but I think I'm good where I am. I've created a community, and I'm doing pretty good for myself," he said. Buzzwords his father would be familiar with.

His father waved him off. "Well, when you decided to start making real money, you know where I am!"

Sure thing, Dad. Ed didn't say it. He just smiled blankly.

"Well, I for one think you're doing a great job," Aunt Rosie said supportively, loudly. That glass of wine hitting her a little hard. "I watched one of your videos just last week. Not the whole thing, I can't sit down that long. But I watched it and I was VERY entertained!"

"Thanks, Aunt Rosie," Ed said, more genuinely.

“Don’t mention it, Hun,” she said. Then after pausing to take another bite of food, she attempted to snap her fingers and pointed at him until she swallowed her mouthful. “I heard somebody visited a certain park, hmm?”

Oh no. She really had watched one of his streams.

Ed’s face blanched and Laura tightened her mouth.

Ed could just hear his father’s head snap over. He didn’t dare look anywhere except for his aunt, staring wide eyed and silently begging her to go quiet.

“So, how was it? Was it spooky?” Aunt Rosie asked. She asked it with the curiosity of someone asking about Halloween plans.

Uncle Kurt looked mildly confused, furrowing his bushy brows. “What park? Dowry Bend?”

“No, an amusement park! Indigo Park! Y’know, with Dad,” she half-whispered.

“You went to Indigo Park?” his father asked with a growing voice and alarm.

Ed finally looked back at him. His father’s eyebrows were up so high that it really punctuated his widow’s peak. It almost looked cartoonish, but Ed wasn’t laughing.

Suddenly, Laura grabbed his seat and shot his parents a brilliant smile.

“We both did! It was amazing just seeing all the places we used to play at. We took a bunch of pictures if you want to see them,” she said. She purposefully made it sound like the most normal thing in the world. “It’s such a shame in never reopened.”

“It wasn’t ever the same after Dad left,” Aunt Rosie tsked. She was entirely oblivious to the tension on the other side of the table.

Ed met eyes with his mother for only a second before quickly moving them to his aunt and then to

his plate. He began to eat like he was starving, if just to give him a reason to be distracted.

“They let people into the park?” his father questioned.

“Well, it’s kind of... Not really, but we got in,” Laura explained.

His father promptly dropped his head into his hand.

“For God’s sake, Ed, are you still doing that- that trespassing? You’re going to get arrested again,” he said firmly. “This is exactly why you need a real job. You shouldn’t have to film yourself doing stupid stuff to make a living.”

“Oh, leave him alone! He’s just having some fun,” Aunt Rosie defended.

“You’re not the one whose son already has an arrest record. That’s what I need, to hear that my son’s getting arrested while at a business meeting. This’ll haunt you the rest of your life, Ed. Once you put

something on the internet it's never going away," he continued to rant.

"We weren't trespassing! The security guard let us go in. He's cool," Laura defended.

"Uh huh," his father said doubtfully. He started slicing through a piece of turkey somewhat aggressively.

Ed didn't say a word in his own defense, and neither did his mother. She was silent the whole time.

Just like she always was.

And normally Ed just let it go, but this time he found himself getting a little more frustrated. He sat on it for a long few seconds, twirling his fork into his mashed potatoes, considering what he was going to do.

"So, Laura. You're still in school, right? How's that going?" Uncle Shaun asked.

“It’s going great! I’m going to nursing school and it’s... it’s going great!” she said with a little shrug. Not much else to say.

“It was good to see Indigo Park again,” Ed suddenly interjected. “It reminded me of Grampa.”

Aunt Rosie put her hands to her chest and made a sort of sympathetic moaning noise, endeared by his comment. He kept his eyes on her as he continued.

“Everything’s really fallen apart but... it’s still standing. The security guard who works there, his name’s, uh, Roy, he says they might be looking to reopen the place.”

His mother looked to his father in surprise. He still had his eyes on Ed. “I’m sorry, who said this?”

“Roy.”

“And I’m sure Roy has all the insider knowledge.”

As a matter of fact, “Roy” did.

...Oh, who was he kidding. Rambley only knew a shred more than he did. When it came to the dirty details, they were both sitting in the dark.

Which led to him remembering them sitting in Rambley's basement the other night. What he'd give to be watching a little train instead of sitting here at this table right now. He was already starting to space out just thinking about it, though that could've been because his father was still going on.

Only to suddenly start paying attention at one specific sentence.

"Your grandfather was a good man, Ed. He just wasn't any good with money. He'd throw it at any flight of fancy! A real dreamer."

Ed looked to his mother again. She gave him a small, apologetic smile.

She didn't say anything though.

He needed some air. He waited until there was a pause in the conversation- because at least Rosie was willing to defend Grampa- and pushed back his chair.

“I forgot, I was supposed to call Roy,” he said quickly. He didn’t even try to sound convincing, he just got himself up and started to leave, holding up a hand to stop Laura when she started to stand. “No, it’s okay. I’m just going out to the car. You keep eating.”

She got the message and let him go. As he walked out of the dining room, his father called after him.

“Don’t get involved in that park! It’s a money pit, and not the fun kind!”

That would’ve almost been funny if it wasn’t sort of true.

...

Rambley might've talked big about the tunnels and utilidors underneath Indigo Park but visiting them for himself was another thing entirely.

He waded through a foot of icy water with teeth chattering and tight both from the cold and dread. He clutched a flashlight in his hands as his eyes darted around at a tunnel system so dark that even a technically nocturnal creature like himself had trouble seeing through it.

But there was a light at the end of the tunnel. Not a literal light, but his flashlight's beam falling on the access door he had been looking for. He tried the door and breathed a sigh of relief when it was already unlocked and he didn't have to spend a second longer in the tunnel. He pulled it open and stepped inside.

Then it was a hop, skip, and a jump- and a hallway- to the storage room proper. This one Rambley had to unlock but did so relatively easily and stepped inside to see shelves laden with supplies.

There was food. Plenty of it. A surplus of rations. More than he had ever seen.

But it was dozens upon hundreds of cans of Lloyd's Luncheon. Not a bag of his own rations in sight.

"Maybe they're in the back," he said. He wouldn't panic yet; he would just walk to the back. And then run to the back as he noticed more tins and almost run into the back when he was stopped by a shelf at the back.

More cans. More Lloyd faces. Some spots had been emptied out, but still-

He looked around for something, anything else.

"There's gotta be more! Something? Anything?!" he sputtered. "They didn't even leave any for Mollie or Finley or Salem either!"

He knew why though. He knew it was because Lloyd was a crazed lion who would go into a frenzy if he wasn't kept well fed. He probably went through

dozens of these cans in a week, and if he got the hankering for a snack on stage, he would have plenty of hapless stacks of meat sitting in the audience to dine on.

They couldn't afford for Lloyd to get even peckish, so they had stuffed the emergency reserve with his cheap canned chow.

In seconds all Rambley's hopes were dashed again. This was the only emergency supply cache in the park that he knew for certain held mascot sustenance. Maybe there were others, but none of them were listed as having it except this one.

This was the only place guaranteed to have supplies for the mascots, and the only mascot it supplied was Lloyd.

Lloyd could eat anything really; he was a lion! He just needed a slab of meat! But Rambley's specialty blend of nutrients to support his body- his new and improved body- was nowhere to be seen. He didn't even know what his body asked for, he just relied on

rations. They were his bread and butter, his comfort food and his necessary vitamins, and he was down to two bags with no idea how to make more.

Rambley pulled his tail around and began to pet it frantically, in a frenzy, trying to calm down.

“Don’t panic! There’s- There’s got to be some somewhere. Just gotta keep looking...”

He looked around at the tins of luncheon. The stacks of thick cans filled with solid slabs of processed meat. Each of which with Lloyd’s grinning, winking, mocking face on the side. A thousand Lloyd’s looking smug.

Like they all knew he was the more important one. The real reason the people came to the park, the real star of the show. The one people still talked about online. All this food and he still had the gall to hunt Ed.

Rambley twisted his hands into the fur of his tail.

And then... he snapped.

He snatched a heavy tin off the shelf and threw it to the floor with a clatter. Not enough. He grabbed and threw another. Then swiped a whole shelf off with a deafening clatter and a frustrated cry.

“It’s always got to be about Lloyd, isn’t it?! Lloyd THIS! Lloyd THAT! He’s the best, he’s the FIRST! He’s totally out of control, if he doesn’t get fed he’s going to kill someone! But Rambley?! Oh no, not Rambley! Rambley’s just DANDY!”

He grabbed ahold of one of the shelves and rocked it and knocked it over, causing it to spill its contents everywhere and crash into another shelf that also tipped over. The sound was nearly deafening, certain to lure anything nearby to it.

But Rambley didn’t care. He was still trashing the room. Ripping down shelves with a strength he didn’t realize he had.

“Why not me?! I was the good one! I took care of everything! The park, the guests- why wasn’t it me?! This is MY park, why wasn’t it me?! Why did you leave me behind with him?!”

He was now trapped in the corner behind all the shelves and tins with nothing else to break. Him panting and his heart pounding.

“What am I supposed to do now?!” he shouted into the room.

There was no answer. To any of it, really. Just him with a bunch of questions that all boiled down to: I don’t know, and there’s nobody left who can tell me.

Rambley finally stopped and stared down at his handiwork. The tinned food all over the place and him panting like he had run a marathon. Ear twitching, eye twitching, taking a deep breath-

And then dropping down onto the floor. His back to a mostly emptied shelf and his head in his hands.

They were shaking. He curled his tail around himself protectively.

He wasn't going to cry. He wasn't going to cry.

He took a deep breath and wiped his eyes.

“What am I supposed to do now...?”

Ask Ed for help?

“I can't keep going to Ed over every little thing...”

He looked at one of the nearby tins. He grimaced and looked away, huffing to himself, and then finally reached over for it.

With a tired sigh, he lifted the large tin into his lap and cracked it open, revealing the slab of meat inside. It smelled strongly of fish, so much so that he wrinkled his nose at it.

But... it was food. And if they loved Lloyd so much, it was probably even better than his food.

He bent the lid to use as a makeshift scoop and scooped up a little bit of the potted meat. With a grimace he dared to take a small bite.

Nope. Definitely not as good as the rations.

But not as bad as some of the extremely expired stuff he had scavenged from around the park in the past. Better than going hungry too. It had to have some vitamins, and it wasn't like Lloyd was using them.

Lloyd's Luncheon? More like Lloyd's Leftovers.

It would do. He wouldn't be happy eating it and it could make him sick or deprive him of necessary nutrition, but what other choice did he have? He had to suck it up and swallow it down.

Maybe if he closed his eyes and really pretended it almost tasted like how he'd imagine turkey would taste. It wasn't like he would know the difference, save that it had to be warmer than this.

After a while sitting there, Rambley got up and climbed over the mess he had made. He made no effort to clean it up, he didn't even try to look at it, and he made his way out with the open tin.

It felt like it took forever before he got back to his treehouse. Though that could've been because he was dragging his feet. He shuffled inside, dropping the tin on the table, and then sulked out to his couch which he quickly curled up on.

He didn't feel like watching anything on TV, and his appetite was long gone- either because of that little bit of the lunch he forced down or how his outburst had upset his stomach. Could've been a mix of both.

Maybe he'd just go to bed and call the whole day a loss. Curling up in bed sounded like a good idea.

He had taken off the work gloves and bandana and just crawled into the welcoming comfort of bed when suddenly a familiar jingle began to play. In an instant he yanked off his blanket, shot up, and then down

the bed, clamoring to grab the satchel he left at the foot. He fished inside and pulled out Ed's phone.

It said "Laura" on the screen, but since she was going with Ed to his parents' it could've been him too. Either way it perked Rambley right up and he answered the call with a smile.

"Hey, Buddy!"

"Hey, it's me," Ed said.

He had guessed right! Though Ed sounded a little quieter than he was expecting.

Gosh, he hoped that the Thanksgiving dinner was going okay. He had been worried about that after what Laura said.

"Well, hello! I didn't expect to hear from you so soon. Happy Thanksgiving!"

"Happy Thanksgiving!" Ed returned a little livelier. Though Rambley could tell that something was off.

“We’re still finishing up dinner but then we’re going to head back home.”

“Great! How’s the spread this year?”

“It’s great. Mom really went all out. The works.”

“Ooo, think you could take some pictures? Or would that be too weird?”

“Can do. Or I’ll ask Laura to do it, nobody will think twice if she does it.”

In hindsight, Rambley should’ve probably asked for him to bring leftovers instead of just pictures of the leftovers, but that wasn’t important now. Something was off. Ed sounded unusually tired.

“What’s the matter, Eddie? You’re awfully quiet, and more than your usual quiet.”

“It’s nothing.”

“Oh, come on.”

“Really.”

“I know ‘nothing’ when I hear it, and this isn’t it,”
Rambley affirmed. “Don’t make me do the sad
raccoon eyes.”

“Over the phone?” Ed asked doubtfully.

“Pweeease tell me what’s wong?” Rambley asked in
a cutesy voice.

Ed snorted in laughter.

“Well, you were supposed to find that more
endearing than funny, but I’ll take my victories where
I can!” Rambley chirped. “Now let ol’ Rambley hear
what ails you.”

“Alright, but it’s a long story...”

“I’ve got a great attention span and nowhere to be!”

...

“Let’s start with I’m sitting in my car right now,” Ed admitted. “I had to get out. Get some air.”

“Nothing wrong with that! Nobody’s giving you a hard time, are they?”

“Uh... No. Not really.”

“No or not really?”

“Both.”

“That’s not really- you know what? I’m not helping. Please keep going.”

But he was helping. Just being on the phone with Rambley was enough to make him cool off a little.

And it made Ed feel comfortable enough to be a little more open.

“It’s tense. My parents found out that I’ve been coming to the park and they’re afraid I’m going to get

arrested, they think I'm wasting my life, the usual. But there's this thing. It's... It's about my Grampa." It felt like ripping a band-aid off finally getting to the point. "We were really close when I was a kid. I used to hang out with him all the time... But he and my dad didn't get along, so he just." He waved his hand. "Cut him off, made us move, and now Grampa's gone and I feel like I'm the only one who cares."

"That's... That's terrible. I'm so sorry, Eddie. What was he like? Do you want to talk about him?"

"I'd love to. He was great. He was one of those fun grandparents who spoils their grandkids and takes them fishing and things like that. Except instead of actually fishing we'd go down to the dock and feed cheese to the fish."

"Cheese?" Rambley asked with amusement.

"Yup! Cheese." He smiled to himself and leaned back in the driver's seat. "He liked to tell stories too. I think he made them up on the spot a lot of times because they'd sort of go all over the place, but they

were fun. Sometimes we'd just sit down at the dock feeding fish and he'd tell me stories, and it was... it was nice."

"Eddie?"

"I'm good." Ed stared up at the roof of his car until the burning in his eyes went away. "Sorry, this is just the first time I've talked about him in a long time."

"Don't be sorry, Eddie. Never," Rambley said gently. "And he sounded like a really fun guy. I'm sorry you lost him."

"Thank you. Me too."

"I wish I could've met him. Do you think- I mean, per say- do you think he might've been... okay with meeting me?"

"I think so. I think he would've really loved to meet you."

“Well who doesn’t?” Rambley joked. Though he sounded more bashful than prideful.

Oh yeah, Grampa would’ve loved him.

Ed was smiling again, but it was short lived. He could’ve left it there, but for whatever reason he couldn’t.

“He was more of a dad then my real dad is. He taught me how to tie my shoes, he taught me how to swim, he cared about me. Dad-... He’s more like this uncle I see every once and a while.”

“I’m sure he loves you though? Even if he doesn’t say it,” Rambley offered, trying to assure him.

“I think he loved me a lot more when he thought I was going to amount to something.”

“Eddie, don’t say that! You’ve amounted to plenty!” Rambley scolded. “Besides, if either of us is the mistake that didn’t amount to anything, it’s me...” he mumbled.

Ed blinked. Where did that come from?

“...What?”

Rambley realized his mistake.

“Oh, nothing! Just kidding!”

“That didn’t sound like nothing, and I know nothing.”

He couldn’t tell if Rambley’s silence was due to hesitation or if he wasn’t amused by him using his earlier words against him.

“Everything good?” Ed pressed.

“Y-Yeah, I’m just...” Rambley sighed. “I guess I’m just a little down today too. But don’t worry about it.”

“You miss me?”

“That’s a little confident of you, isn’t it?” Rambley asked teasingly. “But yeah. It gets a little lonely without you.”

So it was something else-

“There’s something we need to talk about when you come back...”

That was very concerning.

“Is it Salem? What happened?”

“No, no. Nothing happened... Well, nothing like that. I just... It’s about my rations- I don’t want to talk about it now. It’s no big deal.”

“Did you run out?” Ed asked tactlessly. He quickly realized his mistake. “I mean, uh... Sorry.”

“No, you’re right. Like you usually on.” Rambley’s tone cheered up, forced. “We’ll figure it out later! Just know I’m not going hungry.”

Ed wasn't surprised. He knew it was coming- he was shocked he hadn't ran out already. They'd figure that out, but for now:

"Want me to bring you some leftovers?"

"YES- *ahem* I mean, yes! I would love to try some of your mom's homemade cooking! Thank you!"

Ed chuckled a little. He noticed the front door opening and looked over, expecting to see Laura.

The smile was wiped off his face as he saw his mother coming. He should've expected her to follow him out but he didn't really think she would, and now he felt like he had got caught red-handed.

"I've got to go. Mom's coming," he raced out.

"Huh? Your mom?"

"She's coming."

“Oh! Well, tell her I said hi! Or wait, no. Don’t tell her that. Call me back!”

Rambley hung up before Ed had to and he had just enough time to stuff his phone beside his seat before his mother opened the passenger’s side door. He gave her a somewhat guilty smile and she returned a small one.

“Can I join you?”

“Sure.”

She sat down in the seat and shut the door behind her.

“I’m sorry, I just had to make a call. I was coming back in,” Ed hastily apologized.

“It’s okay. I think you made a good call,” she assured. He knew she didn’t mean the phone call.

“How are you doing?”

“Me? I’m fine. Just, uh...” He tapped his fingers on his leg, drawing a blank on an excuse.

There was an awkward silence until his mother sighed.

“I know you miss your grandfather.”

She was talking to him like he was a child, and yet he didn’t stop her. If anything, he looked to her like she would somehow fix all of this.

“I do too. So does your dad, he just shows it in his own way...” she continued.

Ed wasn’t so sure he believed that, but maybe. Maybe he told her something he hadn’t told him.

After a pause she reached out and petted his cheek, laying her hand on his arm.

“No more talking about Grandpa, alright?”

And Ed's heart sunk right back down into his stomach.

"Sure thing, Mom," he said. "Let me just tell Roy I'm heading back in."

She raised her brows and pointed down at the phone, whispering, "Is he still on?"

For a brief second there she was again. He smiled again. "No, I hung up. But it was quick, I need to tell him it wasn't an emergency and then I'll come in."

"Oh, okay. Go right ahead. Tell him I said hi," she said. She hesitated for a long moment then dared, "Is he a... close friend?"

"I'd... say so. Yeah."

"Well... I know you're planning to go to Laura's parents house for Christmas, but if you would like, you could bring him with you and come have Christmas with us."

She knew, he realized. She somehow figured out that he and Laura were just friends. Despite the fact that Rosie mentions of him 'settling down' with Laura was a common topic of discussion throughout the family.

There was no way his father knew though, and that meant his mother must've not told him.

Maybe she did still have his back.

But obviously that wasn't going to happen. He didn't have to tell her that though.

"I'll talk to him about it... Maybe Easter?"

She smiled. He bought himself a little more time before his next disappointment.

"I'd love that." She patted his leg. "Don't take too long."

Then she got out of the car and headed back inside, likely to wait just inside for him to return.

Ed felt torn yet again. Guilty, like he unnecessarily ruined the evening over nothing, but there was always that little voice inside that assured him it wasn't nothing. But he shouldn't have said anything.

He called Rambley back. He answered instantly.

"Eddie?"

"Hey."

"Hey," Rambley said tentatively. "Sooo...?"

"I'm, uh, going to head back in and finish dinner. I'll swing by after I drop off Laura and tell you how it goes."

"Really?! That sounds great! I'll even pick out a movie just in case you're feeling up to it," Rambley chirped.

Ed smiled again. "I'd like that."

“Great! I’ll let you go then. See you later, Eddie!”

“Later!”

He tried to put a little more effort into the goodbye, because he didn’t want Rambley to worry about him.

Besides, he was feeling a little better. It wouldn’t last long with him heading back inside, but it was just a few more hours and then he would be set loose once again. To scamper back to Indigo Park and escape familial expectations and career goals with Rambley the Raccoon.

Grampa would’ve been proud. Waking up with a headache was a bad sign. That meant last night’s dose didn’t take.

Sometimes it didn’t. Sometimes the home remedies kept it at bay but just as often it reared back up and they needed the real stuff.

They dragged out of bed and into the kitchen. The scattered bits of sunlight leaking through the covered

windows causing their eyes to burn and their head to pound. No doubt about it, the meds didn't take.

Their head was killing them.

They could only hope they still had a dose left. Hiking all the way to the labs with a rocking headache would be a real pain. Doable at this stage, but uncomfortable.

They slung open the fridge door and started to feel around in the box on the top shelf for even a single little vial left. They found one. They pulled it back and found only dregs in the bottom. Already used. How messed up had they been that they put an empty one back?

Oh yeah, last time. Last time they doubled up. The first injection didn't take after five hours. Jumped the gun and took a second, didn't want to use the whole thing out of risk of what it could do.

And now they were out. Not because this was flaring up early, though it was, but because they had gotten

distracted, gotten lazy, and hadn't gone back to get more.

Indigo Industries Antivirals were different. They worked instantly to suppress any viral activity. The off-brand stuff didn't cut it, and attempts to replicate had made band-aid solutions that only sometimes worked.

It looked like Salem was hiking out to the Labs then.

Salem sighed and slammed the fridge door before shuffling to the sink for a couple of handfuls of water from the jug beside it. Better now than trying to force it down later. They dumped some over their pounding head for good measure and then went to go get ready to leave.

They grabbed their belt and plenty of smoke bombs and a few mascot suppressants before going to dig through their stash of keycards. Then dug through them again and took each of them out one by one.

The keycard was missing.

Salem quickly sorted through them again in shock. Yes, the labs keycard was absolutely gone. But where could it have-?

Oh wait. Wait. That chick, that friend of Rambley's gofer. She had snuck in, hadn't she? Stolen a plush toy. Apparently, she took something else while she was here.

Salem was too tired to be angry at anyone other than themselves. They should've checked better, but it had been so long since they had gotten a little adoration. A little of that fan fanaticism that made Rambley act so hysterical. It didn't help that she was cute.

They could deal with that later. For now, they had to decide if they were going to hike out to the labs and try to get in or go to the treehouse first. They made their decision quickly.

After a walk that took much longer than it should've, Salem arrived at the treehouse and tried to get

inside. Alas, its occupant wasn't here for whatever reason and they weren't in any condition to break in. Their body pliable and sore while their head was heavy and pounding. Not even breaking the windows would work since they were reinforced enclosure glass, meaning it would take more strength than just a few rocks.

The options now were waiting here or trying to break into the labs another way. They sat down on the step for a few minutes, trying to shield their eye from the beaming afternoon sun, and within minutes was back up on their feet. Restless, itchy, back to walking and heading to the labs.

Everything was painfully bright. At first it was unpleasant but bearable, but that changed the further they went. Soon staying in the shade wasn't enough, and even their own footsteps were causing their head to thump. Bitter saliva filled their mouth and they spat in the dirt once, twice, multiple times on their trip.

It was getting worse. Already more of the recognizable side effects were rolling in.

But Salem made it to the labs and then tried to get inside. At any cost.

Unfortunately, the vent around back was blocked by a fan that they weren't in any condition to force out. Even trying to unscrew it was a fool's endeavor as it stayed upright even with the bolts removed.

After a brief rest in the vent- they passed out, waking up with clammy bangs stuck to their face- they shoved themselves back out and went around front. No other way in, time to get desperate.

They thumped on the door with their fist, kicked it even. Banging with all their might. It might've been pathetic but at this point pride didn't matter when they were starting to see shadows ringing their vision.

But it became clear that he wasn't going to hear them. Even if he did, there was no telling if he'd

actually open the door for them. There was no real truce, they just existed in the same space.

They banged and kicked on the reinforced door, growing more frustrated until finally giving up once they accepted that they could do nothing. It wasn't just weakness; these doors were built to keep mascots out.

By then their knuckles were scuffed. They hadn't realized they had forgotten their gloves, but it was probably better that they didn't tear them up. They glanced over them; at least they stopped themselves before they did real damage. Give them a few hours and they might've been too out of it to notice until they were bleeding. All it took was a little blood to set Lloyd into a feeding frenzy.

Well, they weren't getting in. They put their hands on their hips and hunched over, feeling the throbbing echoing through their head and down their neck. It was getting worse, forming blotches on their vision. Their mouth was watering worse and they spat again onto the steps.

So, what now?

Give up and go home, Salem guessed. Take another dose of the homebrew cure and ride this out.

Convincing themselves that it took the edge off even when they knew it was an all or nothing deal. There was nothing else. No way through the sewers, no way to hack in when their mind was so foggy, no other chances.

Go home or sit here until they couldn't.

So, they went home. It felt like it took ages before they dragged themselves into their kitchen.

They had felt like this before, but it was extremely unpleasant. The constant headache made their stomach turn and the profuse mouthwatering wasn't helping. They spat in the sink and then slumped over it, pouring water over their head and not caring where it spilled. They felt so hot and so chilled at the same time. The fever was kicking in, evidently. Everything was moving very fast.

They got a clean syringe and tried a third dose of the homebrew antiviral. It was their last shot. Literally, by time they knew if this one was working, they would be too shaky to so much as draw up a needle.

The only assurance was that they would get to that point a lot sooner than when they would lose mental cognition. Well, it wasn't exactly an assurance, but survival mattered more than suffering.

At least there wasn't any hydrophobia involved. They could pour as much water as they water over their head and down their throat- not that it would do much good.

They dragged themselves out into the front room and collapsed onto their couch, or the diner booth they made into one. Their chest heaving and head aching. The dull light from the windows was too much.

After a while they moved to the bed and climbed inside. It was too hot for the covers. Too hot for the

bed period, with the blankets sticking to their damp fur. They stretched out uncomfortably but at least took some relief in the darkness the bed curtains provided.

Then they passed out. They must've, as suddenly they were waking up in the same position. Their eye rolling around to figure out what had woken them up.

Something was off. They weren't sure what but something. They didn't dare sit up when their head was still in a vice though. They probably should get water but they weren't thirsty, weren't hungry, just weird.

Almost like a weird feeling of déjà vu. Like a thought on the edge of their mind that they couldn't quite remember. Almost dreamlike in a way.

It became clear with a tremble up their left arm. They felt it coming on. No time to prepare, they rolled onto their side. Knowing. Feeling it.

Within twenty seconds it kicked in. It wasn't painful. It was almost like a conscious blackout, their body shaking and writhing as it happened. It didn't last long, but they came back feeling exhausted.

A seizure. Not a strong one but the first of many. If that didn't assure that the homebrew didn't work, nothing would.

So, what now?

...Ugh, they knew exactly what they would have to do now.

Thankfully, they were still connected into the system, even if it was excruciating to do it.

...

It was funny how all it took to get out of a bad mood was to have some good plans. Less than an hour ago Rambley had been planning to curl up in bed and sulk and now here he was back on his couch searching for movies on Ed's phone, excitedly

looking forward to when he would get there. It probably would still be a while though, but that didn't dampen his mood.

They were not watching a scary movie tonight. Hmm, and from how these options looked they wouldn't be watching a Thanksgiving movie either. Maybe an early Christmas movie? There were quite a few Christmas comedies that would probably brighten both of their moods right up! He started to swipe through them.

When suddenly something happened.

There was an emergency alert.

It had been so long since he had gotten an emergency alert that it startled him and took him a second to realize what it was. He unfocused his eyes and tried to search the system and, sure enough, there was a distress signal.

In years past, before Rambley even had a body, he was in charge of directing emergency services. Less

like a first responder and more like a call center directing the exact route to go- all an automated process, no workers needed. Well, except for him. It had been years since an emergency had flagged. Not even Ed's venturing into the park had set off this many alarm bells.

Rambley was quick to check the location of the alert and was shocked to see that it pinpointed right to Spoiled Swamp.

"What...?" he asked quietly.

He rubbed his chin and squinted as he mentally searched through cameras around Spoiled Swamp- the ones that were still there. He thought maybe he would see a fire or something, though occasionally popped up. But he didn't. He couldn't see anything, and soon he pinpointed the exact location of the alert to being the diner that Salem was holing up in.

"Salem?" he asked in surprise. Then his ears drooped. "Well of course it's Salem. Who else?" he mumbled.

He continued to look around through the cameras and trying to see any details on the alert, but both were dead ends. All he knew was that an emergency alert was activated, and it seemed to have come from the same place where Salem was currently hiding away. How curious. How very, very suspicious.

“Deeeefinitely a trick...” He crossed his arms. “Well, I’m not falling for it!”

Nope! He wasn’t letting himself get fooled by the most obvious trap.

...But what if it wasn’t?

Rambley couldn’t help but worry, even if Salem was a pain in the neck. This was unlike them to sound an alarm to trick him. If they really wanted to get him, they would just walk over here and gas him like last time. They would wait outside of his door, jump him while he was coming out to greet Ed, not activate a distress beacon.

Rambley didn't know what kind of relationship he and Salem had beyond a not-so-friendly rivalry, but he felt in his gut that as mascots surviving in the park that there must've been a code when it came to emergencies. Just like Salem didn't actually hurt him beyond humiliate him, he didn't think they'd cry wolf. Or skunk.

So, he had to make a choice, and after about five minutes of thorough pacing around his house he thumped his fist into his hand and made his decision.

“Alright, fine. I'll go check it out. But if it's a trick-!...
sigh Fool me twice, shame on me.”

He knew it wasn't a good idea, but in the bottom of his heart Rambley couldn't help but still see Salem as a friend. Even if it was a misguided one who was constantly picking fights. Salem was the only one left other than him and Mollie's CD. That had to mean something.

But just in case, Rambley suited up in his already bleached green suit, but kept his bandana on and tucked underneath. It made his neck look a little weird, but it meant if it wasn't a trick then he could take the suit off and still look presentable. Fur or not, he felt naked without that bandana. He brought his little bag for the phone too, in case he got into a jam and needed to warn Ed or ask him for help.

Then, taking a deep breath, he stepped outside and began to make his way to Spoiled Swamp.

He knew the way well now after escorting Laura there. It was much different seeing it in person, such as looking up in awe at the skylight as he passed through the broken shopping mall, but he knew exactly where to go. Soon enough he was crossing little raised bridges and passing plastic poison mushrooms.

He arrived at the diner shortly afterwards. He sized it up and gulped before making his way around back, remembering what Laura said about how she got in.

He found the door closed but unlocked. He opened it, gritting his teeth at the obnoxious creak it made. He then held it back with his foot as he peeked inside. It was a kitchen, as he expected.

There was a funny smell in the air. A sick sort of smell. He knocked on the doorframe.

“Salem?” he whispered. Too low for anyone to hear, let alone someone in the next room.

There was no response.

He stepped inside, catching the door and closing it quietly behind him before venturing inside. His eyes darted around, watching for any movement, any snares or wires, any sort of tricks to be had.

The only thing amiss was the smell. It got stronger as he stepped out of the kitchen and into the darkened main room, behind the counter. It smelled strongly of sweat and something amiss. It was like when Ed was sick but it was so much stronger,

worse. This wasn't just a simple cold or flu. This was bad.

No sign of Salem either.

"S-Salem...?" Rambley squeaked.

He heard a low groan.

"Took you long enough."

"Salem?" Rambley stepped in further, ears pricking up at their groggy sounding voice. That didn't sound right at all. He came around the counter and was startled to see Salem sprawled out on the floor by their bed. "...Why are you laying on the floor?"

"Bed's too hot. Don't ask," Salem dismissed. They rolled their head in his direction, squinting to see past the haze that was covering their vision. "I need that keycard you swiped from me."

"What? Who- Who said I took a keycard from you? What keycard?" Rambley asked.

He was a terrible liar. Even in the darkness and with their foggy vision they could see the nervous smile on their face. They groaned impatiently.

“Save the theatrics for later. I don’t know if ya noticed, but I’m not doin’ so hot. If I don’t get that keycard back, then I’m as good as dead.”

That changed the mood instantly. Rambley was startled by it, almost not believing it at first but something in the way Salem was acting made it clear that it wasn’t a ruse. It couldn’t have been. Salem wouldn’t trick him to get the keycard back, they would’ve just ambushed them and shook it out of him. Possibly while dunking them upside down into something slimy and gross.

But instead, they were laying on the floor. Their fur sagged with sweat, smelling of sickness.

This was an actual emergency.

“What’s going on? I can tell that you’re sick,”
Rambley asked seriously, worriedly.

Salem scowled a little. Less out of genuine frustration and more out of exasperation. They didn’t want to talk but Rambley wasn’t just going to go along without an explanation.

“I’m outta antiviral and the labs are locked up tighter than your ass.”

“*huff* First of all, rude. Secondly... Wait... Wait, you have a virus?” Halfway through it clicked for Rambley. The virus. “What... kind of virus?”

“Nothing that’s gonna infect you, Smart Guy, but glad to see where your loyalties lie.”

“That’s not why I asked! I’ve heard of a virus that was spreading through the mascots...!” Rambley cut himself off, staring at them for a long second in realization. “...And you have it, don’t you?”

“We’ve all got it, Dumpster Face,” Salem cryptically replied. “Except you.”

There was a long, uncomfortable silence shared between them.

Rambley was left reeling by the news. He knew what Ed had said, but he hadn’t thought that- Salem? Mollie too? Lloyd certainly, but-?

“The keycard,” Salem said impatiently.

“Right! I’ll go get it and be right back!” Rambley agreed. He started to run out, only to stop on a dime, turn on his heel, and stride back. “Wait, wait, wait,” he said, pinching the bridge of his nose. “One little problem. How are you supposed to go into the labs when you’re so sick you’re lying on the floor?”

“Not sure, but if I don’t, I’m dead meat.”

“Stop saying that, please,” Rambley said with a huff. Now he was getting exasperated, or more-so very anxious. “I... Maybe I can go in there.”

“Nah. That’s not happening.”

“And why not?”

“You got in there yerself?” Salem asked, eye flicking to him like they already knew the answer.

“I can still try. As long as I didn’t... Wait! Eddie’s coming here after he visits his parents! Maybe he could-... but the last time he went down... It will be dangerous, he couldn’t...”

“He might,” Salem said. “He went down before?”

Into the labs, Rambley correctly guessed. “Yes. He went down there to find Mollie’s backup disk.”

Salem scoffed. “Good luck finding that.”

“As a matter of fact, he did!”

Salem's head snapped over, but the resulting pang caused them to hiss and arch their back into the floor, nearly writhing. Rambley winced at seeing it.

"Can I get you something? Can I help? If there's anything I can do-."

"If he got down there and got out then he's good. He can do it," Salem interrupted. "But not you. Don't go in there."

"...Why?"

"Because it ain't a friendly place. Trust me on this."

If not for Salem getting a full body twitch afterwards that reminded him that they were very sick, Rambley would've certainly continued prying.

"Here we go. Don't freak."

"Don't freak about what?" Rambley asked uneasily.

Salem kinda gave a dismissive sort of shrug before they got a distant look in their eye. One that was sort of glassy, which made Rambley wonder if they were trying to connect online.

Then much to his horror, they began to shake and shudder. Seizing on the floor- a seizure. They were having a seizure! Rambley began to panic, closing the gap between them and standing over them.

“Salem?! Oh my gosh, Salem?! Can I do- What do I do?! Oh no, no, no, no, no!”

He could only watch with fear as it continued, unable to do a thing to help. Not even able to reach out and touch them, too afraid he would do something wrong and hurt them further.

Eventually the shakes stopped, and Salem went slack again.

“Salem?! Salem, can you hear me?!”

Salem finally responding. Their voice groggy and a little slurred.

“Quit yellin’. ‘M fine.”

“You are most certainly NOT fine! How long have you-?!... Hold on!”

Rambley turned on his heel and strode a few steps away before getting Ed’s phone out of his bag. He briefly froze up, staring at it for a long second, knowing what he was going to be asking Ed to do. Then he swallowed those feelings down, unlocked the phone, and called up Laura’s number. He started to peel off his green suit as he waited for her to answer.

Within a few moments, Laura did.

“Hi, Rambley!” she chirped.

“Hey, Laura. Umm, put Ed on the phone please? We have a problem. An emergency, we have an emergency over here,” Rambley said. It was hard to

be pleasant and not panicked but he knew he had to keep cool.

Laura's tone changed instantly. "Is everything okay? Are you hurt?!" Then there was a little scuffle, a quiet, "Okay, okay, here."

And then Ed was on the phone. "Rambley? What happened?"

Ah, Eddie. Always worried for him. Always so quick to jump in for him. It made Rambley smile despite the situation, and despite the dread of knowing what he would soon be asking him.

"Hey, Buddy. Sorry to interrupt your family time, but I've got a little bit of a..." He sighed, his voice growing solemn and quiet. "I'm going to need you to come down here. It's about Salem..."

"I'm on my way. I'm about thirty minutes out, just hide in the basement until I get there, okay?"

“No, it’s not that. Salem’s not coming after me, they’re sick. I found them on the floor-.”

“Willingly on the floor,” Salem dryly added in from a few feet back.

“It’s just a bit of a mess and I’m going to need your help. I’m sorry to pull you away from your family, I really am.”

“No, Buddy, I’m on my way home. Don’t worry about it. I’m just- hold on. Wait a second.” Ed paused and Rambley could faintly hear Laura whispering in the background. Then Ed came back on, “What’s the symptoms?”

“Well, they’re feverish for sure. They look tired and... they had a seizure.” Rambley whispered behind his cupped hand, “They say it’s a virus.”

“They said it’s a virus,” Ed parroted to Laura. Then he must’ve done a double-take. “Wait, a virus?”

“Yes and yes,” Rambley said. “I’ll explain when you guys get here. We’re at Salem’s diner in Spoiled Swamp. Laura will know the way, and it was clear when I came through so just be careful. Just call back when you get to the gates, and I’ll escort you the rest of the way.”

“Sounds like a plan. Just sit tight, we’re coming.”

“Thank you, Eddie...”

“Don’t mention it.”

He could tell Ed was concerned from the way his tone had shifted after the mention of the virus, but he knew as well as Rambley did that he was supposedly immune. Though maybe he was worried on Salem’s sake. Rambley certainly was.

As he hung the phone up, he knew he should do something, but he didn’t know what.

“They’re on their way. It’ll be just about forty-five minutes if my guess is correct. Think you can hold on?” Rambley said.

“Not like I’ve gotta choice,” Salem answered. “She’s with him?”

“Laura? Yes- but she will know better than anyone on what we should do. She’s in medical school!”

“Huh... Good. That way I don’t have to hunt her down to shake her down for stealin’ my junk.”

“You are not going to do that,” Rambley said authoritatively. Salem smirked. “You are going to stay right there until you cool down and then it’s straight to bed!”

“Whateva you say, Boss.”

Well, good to see that the sickness hadn’t taken any of sass out of them.

But it looked like there was some time to kill. Forty-five minutes weren't going to go by quickly, especially not in this situation. Rambley considered what he could do before he had an idea and walked out of the room.

With him gone and still feeling exhausted, Salem let their eyes close and went back to laying prone on the floor. It was humiliating having to ask him and his human 'buddies' for help but Salem's pride was shot. They'd rather live, even if they wouldn't live it down. Anything to stop the descent before it grew any worse than this.

They heard water running in the kitchen and shortly afterwards Rambley came pattering back. They assumed he had gotten a drink or washed his hands, something like that. Until they noticed how close he was getting.

Their uncovered eye snapped open in time to see Rambley kneeling on one knee and reaching towards them with a wet washrag in his hands. The one they used to wipe off the counters with.

Rambley paused when they looked at him. Salem squinted at him suspiciously.

“What are you doing?”

“Helping out a friend in need,” Rambley replied.

Salem looked downright confused, sizing him up like they thought he was pulling a fast one. Rambley noticed and sighed.

“Look, I know we have our differences, but I know what it feels like to be sick and be all alone.” He slowly reached out and patted the rag on their forehead. “And now I know what it feels like to have someone there to take care of you, and frankly, I prefer one a lot more than the other. So, let’s forget about all the stuff between us and let me help in the one way I know how.”

Salem studied his face and considered whether they wanted to let him get that close or not. He could’ve been trying to lull them into a false sense of security,

but Salem knew the raccoon in front of her was largely harmless. The worst thing he could've done was not shown up. They decided, somewhat reluctantly, to give him the benefit of a doubt.

“Knock yourself out. Just don't try anything.”

Rambley exhaled the breath he had been holding and smiled as he started to pat down and dab at the skunk's fur and face. He was careful and smooth with his motions and took care to avoid the bang and covered eye.

The rag was clean enough. Salem didn't really care if it wasn't. The cool water was sort of nice. It made them shudder a little but it soothed the headache slightly. They let their eyes close again.

Rambley felt like he needed to say something. Like it was too quiet in the room. At the risk of saying something that would get him kicked out, or worse make him sound like a complete fool, he decided instead to break the silence with some soft humming. He hummed the ‘If I Ever See Home

Again' song from the 'Round the World special; it always felt very comforting to him.

They were like that for a while. Him working diligently to dampen Salem's already sweat-soaked fur and they laying there resting. I

f someone had told Rambley earlier today that he and Salem would be in the same room together without fur flying or insults getting slung then he wouldn't have believed a word of it, but here they were.

It felt like an episode of an Indigo cartoon. In fact, he recalled a very similar scenario with Mollie. Except it was less rivals making peace due to sickness and her overworking herself while sick. Gosh, he loved that one.

"Do you remember that time Mollie got sick?"

"What?" Salem asked groggily. Their eye slightly cracking open. "What're you talkin' about?"

“You know, ‘The Bird Flu’! When Mollie was sick with the flu and didn’t want anyone to know because she wanted to practice for the High-Flying Fair, and then I got to take care of her and got her to rest- and what do you know? She got better just in time to be at that fair and she even won first place! But it IS Mollie, she could’ve won that contest sick and blindfolded!”

Salem stared at him for a long second, then gave a somewhat flat, “Yeah, that was cool.”

There was something weird in their tone, and an equally unsettled pause followed it. It made Rambley uneasy; he couldn’t tell if Salem was just sick and not wanting to talk or if they had something on their mind.

And when Rambley got uneasy and antsy he tended to ramble, so off he went.

“Funny enough, that wasn’t the only ‘work yourself to death’ episode, was it? There was that time when Lloyd kept doing round the clock shows and then everyone had to keep the theater quiet while he tried

to sleep. And I was the butt of every joke,” he mumbled out of the side of his mouth. “Then the time- oh! Remember when Finley lost his voice, and everybody banded together to try and find a cure?! I seem to recall a certain skunk putting aside their differences to help out.”

“Shame it was him an’ not you,” Salem said with a slight smirk.

“Very funny, but I know you had a little bit of a soft spot for him,” Rambley said with a self-satisfied smile.

Salem’s smirk dropped off again and they looked at him with something between confusion and suspicion once more. Rambley retorted by cocking a brow and an ear, silently questioning it.

“Y’know those aren’t real, right?” Salem asked bluntly.

That caught him off-guard. Not just the question alone but the look on their face. It wasn’t mocking

like he would've expected from a question that direct but entirely serious. Their tone almost even sounded the slightest bit concerned. That couldn't be, but...

Rambley stared back for a long second before sighing heavily and looking away.

"...I know. But I like to pretend they are," he said lowly.

He couldn't look at them. Something about the callout made him feel embarrassed in a way he hadn't ever before. It tightened up a knot of disappointment in his belly.

And the worst part was, he knew Salem didn't say it to be mean. If they had it would've been so easy to shrug it off. The fact that they weren't only made it more real.

Salem continued staring at him, watching him sink into himself like a kicked puppy, and rolled their eyes before tossing him a bone.

“Cause if they were, I’d totally be thrashing you all the time.”

He ate it up instantly and that knot in his stomach loosened right up. He played right along.

“Oh no you wouldn’t. Maybe your memory’s a little foggy but I seem to recall Rambley the Raccoon thwarting Salem the Skunk quite a few times with a little help from his friends!”

“You were gettin’ carried so much they oughta’ve stuck ya in a baby carriage.”

Rambley clicked his tongue. “Is that a jab at my height?”

“Yeah, that too.”

The raccoon huffed a little, but he did get a smidge of a reluctant smile. “Well, I certainly don’t mind getting a little help when I need it. Now shh. You shouldn’t talk.”

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“Because you’re going to talk yourself right out of a helper if you keep it up.”

Salem gave a dry scoff.

“Besides, what is Indigo Park but a living cartoon world?” Rambley quietly asked.

“Hell,” Salem replied.

“Only in August,” Rambley countered.

The silence was a little less consuming after that. Or it was for about fifteen minutes until Salem had another seizure. During which Rambley pulled back and sat there wringing the rag in his hand and biting his lip as he watched. It was excruciating to watch and to know there was nothing he could do if it didn’t stop.

But it did, and then Salem went especially quiet. Still awake but clearly not feeling up to talking and

drooling a lot more. They wiped their mouth lazily over and over again. It was a little gross, but Rambley tried to ignore it and certainly not show it. It wasn't like Salem could help it.

It felt like ages before Rambley detected the sound of movement outside. He lifted his head, gave a quick "Hold on", and then unfocused to check the cameras.

He caught a glimpse of Ed following Laura around the back of the diner. They made it!... And he hadn't checked the front gate. They must've just walked right in without him getting alerted. He would have to check later and make sure it was because he had been distracted and not because the censor went out- one disaster a day, please.

"They're here," Rambley sighed with relief.

"'Bout time," Salem muttered. They cracked their eye open and rolled it towards Rambley, obviously in significant pain as their headache continued to grow. "How do I look?"

“Not great...” Rambley admitted.

Their eye narrowed at him.

“You look fine! A little sick, but very presentable.”

“Ugh. I meant my bangs.”

“Oh, that! Everything’s covered. I didn’t mess it up at all.” Rambley poofed it up a little for good measure.

“There!”

“Rambley?” Laura called from the kitchen.

“We’re back here!” Rambley called back.

Laura came around the counter with Ed in tow, then rushed up.

“Wait, they’re still on the-?!... Floor.” Laura caught herself when Salem looked up at her. “Hi.”

Now at this point Salem was feeling awful. Much worse than when Rambley first came in. The headache was worse, their stomach was churning, and the voices were like icepicks in their ears and in a sharp point located above their left eye. It was a terrible sensation, and all Salem wanted was to pass out and not wake up until it was over.

But Salem would suck all of that up just to lay on a good impression. They gave her a lazy- exhausted-toothy grin.

“Hey.”

The split second of a smile breaking that worried look Laura had was worth how painful the meager effort was. Sneaky little thieving rat or not, she had her charms.

Rambley chose to ignore the entire exchange. “Yup. But don’t look at me, I tried to get them back in bed twice, but they want to stay down there,” he explained, clearly expressing his equal disapproval.

“Okay! We can work with that,” Laura said. She knelt beside them, trying to approach this as though she was dealing with a human patient despite the unlikely circumstances. “Did you give them anything for the fever?”

“No, I didn’t want to leave them. And I’m not entirely sure the medicine around the park is still good. It’s certainly not in date anymore...” he said worriedly.

“Shoot!” Laura began to quickly look through her purse, scouring it in case there was some chance she just happened to have a fever reducer in there. “See, I remembered what you said about the seizure and a high fever could cause that for sure. So, our first priority is getting it down and second is to figure out what’s causing it. Or the other way around but we don’t want to mess with seizures.”

Unsurprisingly, Laura didn’t have anything in her purse except for a little roll of antacids. She gave Rambley an almost pleading smile. “Do you have a thermometer?”

“I don’t. And Salem’s not on the system so I can’t check their vitals through that either. If we only had a... WAIT!” He spun on his heel and shot out his hand. “Eddie, hand me your Critter Cuff, please!”

Ed did as he asked and Rambley quickly crouched down and wrapped it around Salem’s wrist. While the setup was still configured to Ed’s account, the one Rambley made for him, the vitals switched to Salem.

“Here we go! I’ve got a heart monitor on them AND using the mood ring attachment I can estimate their body temperature!” Rambley chirped.

“Hey, great! We finally have a use for that thing,” Ed said. He patted Rambley on the back. “Smart thinking, Buddy.”

“Thank you! I consider it one of my better ideas,” Rambley said with a flick of his tail. He then unfocused again. “Now, let’s see... Hmm... I can’t get an exact temperature. The mood ring’s upper limit is about 102 degrees for the ‘Very Enraged’

mood, sooo... Maybe about 103? Just a guesstimation, but I figure it's pretty close."

Laura clasped her hands "Okay, ice cold bath time!"

"Nah, I think I'd rather lay here an' die," Salem said. Laura's eyes went wide.

"Don't you start with that again," Rambley said. Planting his hands on his hips and giving them a disapproving look. "Don't listen to them, Laura. They don't mean it."

Laura didn't seem very reassured, but that was more so about the high fever and total lack of medicine, and what could be causing it.

She didn't have to wonder long though.

"Is this the same thing Panko had?" Ed whispered over Rambley's shoulder.

"Who's Panko?" Laura asked.

“The mascot from the autopsy report.”

“Oh, Panko...” Rambley said quietly and remorsefully. “It is. The fever, the seizures, the drooling...”

“I ain’t droolin’-,” Salem cut in.

“Oh my God. Could you have distemper?” Laura suddenly interjected.

Salem gave her a sharp look.

“It sort of sounded like distemper,” Laura clarified.

“Don’t dogs get that?” Ed asked.

“Not just dogs...” Rambley said nervously, looking like he started to break a sweat. “I mean, could it...?”

“It’s not distemper,” Salem muttered with exasperation. Saying it slow and drawn out like they were explaining it to a room of idiots. “It’s a virus.”

“Distemper IS a virus,” Laura said matter-of-factly. Less convinced that was it and more to prove that she knew some of what she was talking about. “Not that I’m saying you have it! It could be something totally different.”

“Rabies?” Ed suggested. “But it said on the report that it was the chip that caused the brains to rot.”

Ed realized his mistake instantly from Rambley’s frantic waving and throat cutting motion to shut up.

“Uh, I mean... They didn’t rot, they just were really infected by something.”

“Thanks for the help detectives but all’a ya can shut up now,” Salem said dryly. This got them to clam up enough for them to explain. “Look, it doesn’t matter what it is. I don’t care, you don’t care, and we ain’t gonna cure it. I need an antiviral, and if I don’t get the strong stuff soon I’m goin’ the way of ol’ Panko. But thanks to you three- ‘specially you, Blondie- I lost my ticket into the labs.”

Laura flushed and tightened her lips before eeking out a tiny, “Sorry...”

“Speaking of that, umm...” Rambley wrung his hands before turning back to Ed and taking his arm. “Ed, could I speak to you in the kitchen for a second?”

Ed had a bad feeling already but agreed and followed him out. Laura watched them go, having a suspicion about what the conversation would entail.

This was exactly why Ed should’ve been upfront about what was waiting in the labs, she thought. She then looked back at Salem-

Who was still eyeing her. Right, her deception had been uncovered and her cover blown. Suddenly she was feeling a lot more helpful.

“Do you need anything? Some water? Maybe a pillow? We should really get you into bed but if you feel better down here then that’s fine by me!”

Salem gave her a weary look.

“You afraid of touchin’ a sick person?”

“Only a little, but not you. I think it’s pretty safe to say this won’t spread to me... right?”

Salem answered by dragging their hand up to grab the mostly dried rag that Rambley had left on the floor beside them. They handed it to Laura, which she took. They then caught her hand, to her surprise, and dragged it to their hand to push against their forehead.

“Now that I can do. This isn’t really wet though.”

“Eh.” Salem shrugged a little. “When it stops workin’, you can get the pillow and just hold it over my face until I conk out.”

Laura gave a half-snicker but caught herself, knowing better to encourage that. Though from that little smirk showing back up on Salem’s face it was clear that it already had.

Meanwhile in the kitchen, Rambley took a deep breath before turning around to face Ed.

“We have a big problem here,” he said.

“I’ll say. If this is anything like Panko... That was bad.”

“It’s not that bad... yet. But if we’re going to save Salem, we’re going to need this special Indigo Industries developed antiviral medicine. And unfortunately that means going back to the labs to get it...”

Ed got a look of dread that Rambley noticed. He looked aside.

“I told Salem I would go, but-.”

“No!” Ed quickly interrupted. Rambley looked startled. “...No, I... I can go. I’ve already been down there. I know where I’m going.”

“Are you sure? You seemed pretty spooked when you came out last time...” Rambley reminded.
“...What did you see down there?” he quietly asked.

“Mostly a bunch of medical equipment. It just looks like a big hospital, sort of. Saw a creepy video. Nothing I can’t handle.”

The raccoon gave him a frown. He didn’t entirely believe him clearly, and Ed caved.

“Okay, I thought I saw something, but... I can handle it. I handled Mollie, Lloyd, we handled Barlow, and the bats. If I get down there and see anything I’ll just outrun it and get out,” Ed assured him.

“Mmm... *sigh* I don’t like this one bit, but we don’t have much of a choice. Salem all but confirmed to me that I’m not going to get in there... But they can? Huh.” Rambley got a thoughtful, almost suspicious look as he silently mulled it over. He shook his head.
“I guess it doesn’t matter now. But I’ll come with you! Do you think Laura can handle Salem on her own?”

“If she can handle three hours with my family, I think she can handle a little while with Salem.”

“Heh, so I take it you had a really fun time at Thanksgiving?” Rambley joked with a little smile. Then he remembered the call and covered his mouth apologetically. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“No, that was a good one,” Ed said. He mustered a smile to prove it. “But this is the highlight of my day, so there you go.”

But it wasn’t. It would’ve been if he was just back here in Indigo Park, visiting Rambley, but he wasn’t.

He was going back down there.

He was going to see it again.

“Well, at least let me come with you and wait outside. For moral support! Just in case you need someone to open the door,” Rambley suggested with a kindly, thankful smile.

The things Ed got himself into for that smile.

“Sounds like a plan,” he said.

“Great! Lemme just swing back in and get your Critter Cuff back and we’ll head on over there! Another Eddie and Rambley adventure- and this time a holiday special! Good thing I came dressed to impress.” He fixed his bandana and walked past Ed, his fluffy tail purposefully brushing along his leg. “Sit tight and I’ll be right back.”

And he did. He stood there like a lump with a one-hundred-yard stare aimed at the wall. Staring at nothing.

Nothing but the mental image of that hollow face smiling up from the darkness. It was already dark when Ed and Rambley had left the diner. The clouds that rolled in had only sped up the process, leaving Indigo Park in an ominous, moonless night. Or an abnormally dark twilight.

Ed clicked on his flashlight and shined the way around the diner. Suddenly it seemed like there were so many ominous shadows just big enough hide something in them. Something tall and lanky, with a uncanny smile.

It was official. Ed was creeped out. A feat that he didn't think was possible when Rambley was right there and they were out in the open.

But he knew it was because of what they were walking towards more than anything out here. There was no doubt in his mind that it wasn't out here anywhere, but still somewhere in that basement waiting for him to waltz back in. And he had nothing but a useless Critter Cuff strapped to his wrist to protect him.

Rambley was none-the-wiser. Clearly unsettled about what was going on but had no idea what was truly down in that basement. The wind blew into them, and he hugged himself with a shiver.

“Brrr, it’s getting cold! Got to love that late autumn-breeze,” he remarked. He rubbed his arms before noticing Ed taking his jacket off. “Eddie, no, I wasn’t hinting for that!”

“I know, but take it,” Ed said.

“Are you sure? I’ve got a built-in coat and it’s pretty chilly.”

“I’m good! Trust me.”

He was about to break a sweat anyways. A little cool air would do him good.

“If you insist! Thanks a bundle,” Rambley took his coat and eagerly pulled it on, carefully zipping it up to not catch any fur in it. “How’s it look on me?” He held out his arms.

Ridiculously long due to the height difference, but utterly adorable.

Ed gave him a thumbs up. “Looking good.”

“Great!”

He hugged into it, pulling it close to his body and holding in the warmth. Even going so far as to nuzzle into it.

Rambley noticed Ed watching and froze up. He gave a nervous chuckle as he lowered the jacket.

“It’s- uh- it’s very warm!”

Adorable. What a time to not have his phone on hand...

“You have the phone right?”

“Sure do! It’s right here in my-!... Bag.” Rambley side-eyed him. “But I know what you’re getting at and no, you get it when we get to the labs.”

Ed snapped his fingers. Rambley grinned back.

And two seconds after they went silent again, the painful foreboding feeling settled in again. God, that thing. That thing. How was he going to handle that thing if he ran into it?

He couldn't. He would have to run the second he saw it and hope it wasn't as fast as it sounded. He didn't even have his running shoes on and he was going to have to run like the wind-

"Sooo, dinner was okay?"

Thank goodness, something equally emotionally charged to get distracted by.

"It was... Yeah," Ed said unconvincingly.

"That good, huh?" Rambley asked sympathetically.

"Just awkward is all. It was okay."

The raccoon hummed unconvinced, but he didn't press. He just stepped closer and patted his arm.

“Sorry to put more on your plate,” Rambley apologized.

Ed chuckled lightly. Rambley quirked a brow.

“...Oh, I thought that was a dinner pun.”

Rambley guffawed at him and laughed a little.

“Good one! Or, well, it would’ve been if I meant it like that. Let’s pretend that I did,” he said. “But what I meant is that you’re doing a wonderful thing helping Salem. I’m glad they came to us... *sighs* But I’ll be happy when we get home.”

“Me too... Oh. By the way, I left the food in the car again.”

“That’s dangerous, Buddy. Might get some wild animals in there.”

Ed reached out and nudged his arm. “Or at least one.”

“Hey! I’ll have you know that I’m a very sophisticated animal-like biomass, thank you very much!”

That got another, more genuine chuckle out of Ed and Rambley seemed quite pleased with the result.

Things stayed lighter as they headed to the entrance so that Ed could get the Royal Rangler cuff from his glove department and his backpack, and then to the treehouse and got the keycard and headed to the tram.

It was only once on the tram that the weight of dread doubled up on his shoulders but Ed ignored it. If he could ignore his better judgement to come back to Indigo Park despite it trying everything in its power to kill him, then he could do this for-... Salem.

Okay, maybe it would work better to consider this a ‘Do it for Rambley’ moment instead. Yeah. Do it for Rambley.

Not long later they disembarked the tram, it wasn’t long before they were walking up the stairs towards

the labs. The lights were on inside, which Ed guessed was a good sign. He'd rather not do this in the dark, flashlight or not.

The doors were still wide open too. He had expected them to close automatically and knowing they hadn't made him feel slightly better.

"Huh, that's weird. I thought Salem said they couldn't get into the labs," Rambley said while rubbing his chin.

Never mind. Ed was feeling a lot worse now.

"Or maybe they said they couldn't get to the labs and just assumed the doors were locked? I could've gotten it wrong."

They both had looks of uncertainty as they walked up to those doors but for completely different reasons. They hesitated outside. Or Ed did and Rambley followed suit. He looked up at the human at his side and could see that distant look. He was

uneased. Nervous about going inside. And that made Rambley nervous about letting him go.

Soon enough Ed steadied himself enough to take a step forward, but Rambley's hand shot out to grab his sleeve.

"Eddie, wait..." he mumbled.

Ed was more than willing to wait. He looked down at him questioningly.

"Are... Are you sure you want to go alone? Look."

Rambley started to step inside. Ed made a grab for him by the jacket, but with a little turn and a hop he dodged the grab and crossed the threshold with his hands up. Rambley gave him a shrug.

"See? It's safe enough! That... thing that happened last time only happened when I tried to connect to the system. If I don't, I'll be completely fine! What do you say, Eddie? Are you up for another classic Ed

and Rambley Shenanigan?" he asked with a winning smile.

But no matter how much Ed would've loved to say yes and kept him by his side, there was no way Rambley was going anywhere near those labs or that thing in them. It was bad enough he brought him to the wide-open front door.

"Y'know I'd love to, but..."

Rambley's smile faltered.

"I need to do this one alone. I can handle it!... But someone needs to stay up here and make sure the door opens back up."

"I guess, but... If you say so."

"I've got it covered," Ed said. He gave a shaky thumbs up.

"Okay... Okay! Then I will be right here eagerly waiting until you get back!" Rambley said, putting on

a bright smile. “I can’t get a reading on the basement layout for obvious reasons, but I would bet a dollar and a quarter that the antiviral will probably be located where they keep the medicine, which would probably be in or adjacent to the bloodwork bay- or the Phlebotomy Lab if you want to get technical.”

He knew where that one was at least.

“That narrows it down a little. Thanks, Buddy.”

“Anytime!... Hey wait! At least take your jacket!”
Rambley called after him. He opened the jacket in offering, but Ed declined.

“Keep it until I get back. I won’t be down there long.”

“Alright then. Well... be careful down there!”

Rambley closed the jacket tight around himself and watched as Ed waved and walked around the corner. After hesitating in front of the basement door- Rambley heard him do so, he dragged it open and

stepped inside. It closed with a resounding thump, and with it Rambley's ears drooped.

There had to be something more that he could do than just sit here. He couldn't NOT be helpful, not when he was the whole reason Ed was going back downstairs. But as he looked around anxiously, he realized he was very limited in options. Take the plunge and try to connect again or prop open the basement door and sneak downstairs after him. Neither of which held much promise.

He sighed deeply and settled in for a long wait.

Unaware of what Ed had just walked into.

Ed had been very careful as he opened the door. He shined his flashlight around, despite the low lights of the stairwell being on, and kept the door propped open with his foot as he leaned in as far as he could and looked down through the stairwell. To his immediate relief, nothing was looking back.

He didn't exactly feel comfortable, but he partially let his guard down and let the door shut.

The lights died the second it clicked into place.

His heart sped up in seconds and began to pound against his ribcage. That had to be it. It had to be waiting for him. He turned and tried to open the door only to find it stuck tight, no matter how much he yanked at it.

But Rambley would come and open the door once he noticed the power was off, wouldn't he? Ed hoped so but that hope was quickly dashed as he realized there was a dull light at his feet. There was light coming from under the door. There was still power out there.

Something cut the power only to the stairwell

He needed to leave. Now. Now.

...

...No. He could do this. He had no choice anyways. Like Salem or not, he couldn't stand there and watch them deteriorate. Not after what he had read on that autopsy report.

If that thing was at the bottom floor, it was only a matter of time before it came up, so he quickly but quietly made his way down the steps. All he had to do was get into the first floor where he could hide and then grab the antivirus when he had the chance.

He swore he could hear the thump, thump, thump footsteps racing up from the bottom floor, but he couldn't. It was just his pulse in his ears, which were straining to hear anything amiss. Focusing on each of his footsteps to see if there was another set lining up with them.

He passed the first subfloor landing. The door was shut tight and there were no lights on inside. He continued to slowly descend the stairs, daring to steal a look over the railing to make sure nothing was there. He couldn't see anything, but he wasn't convinced it wasn't still down there somewhere.

He passed the second subfloor landing and stopped for a long second to get his breathing under control. He swallowed thickly and continued down the next set of stairs-

And then there came a loud pop.

But it wasn't the pop of a door opening or something crunching, but the dull pop of electricity returning to the stairwell. The yellowed lights clicked back on with a quiet sizzle.

Ed froze up on the steps and just listened. He waited to hear a door creak open, footsteps, breathing, something... but there was nothing except the low sound from the lights and distant ventilation. Nothing else.

Ed slowly stepped over to the railing and suddenly leaned over to look down the now alit shaft, but there was nothing there. Nothing was looking back. Nothing could be seen in his narrow radius.

It had to be down there though, because who else could've turned the lights off and on? Suddenly he didn't feel any safer with those lights on.

But he continued down towards the third subfloor. He came around the upper landing to find the door standing there ominously. He approached it cautiously and listened close before twisting the handle, pausing, and then pushing it open. He stepped into the familiar hospital hallway and quickly shut the door behind him.

So far so good. He acknowledged the arrows painted on the wall and began to head down the rightward hall towards the phlebotomy lab.

When he finally heard something.

But it wasn't what he was expecting.

"Hello? Hey! Hellooo!"

"Rambley...?" Ed asked in quiet confusion.

“Hey, over here! Can you hear me?!”

Ed cautiously edged towards the source of the voice. He found himself led to the security office door, which was open. That was enough of a red flag to get Ed to stop in place.

Rambley whistled. “Over here, Buddy!”

But Rambley’s voice lured him in. He shuffled in closer and leaned to peek into the security office door.

And there was Rambley. Not in the flesh but projected on the working screens in the security office.

He noticed Ed at the door and perked up. “There you are, Buddy! Heh, took you long enough.”

“Rambley...?”

“That’s my name! And I’m just yanking your chain. You had me worried for a second.”

“How did you... You weren’t supposed to connect in. What happened?” Ed asked, surprised to see him.

Rambley gave a sheepish smile and wrung his hands. “About that... *sigh* I know, I know, but I just thought it would be better to take the risk than to have never had tried at all. But hey, it worked! And now you’ve got your favorite guide here to lead you on your way.” He pointed a thumb to his chest proudly which he puffed out. “I even got the lights on!”

This changed things considerably. Just having Rambley here made Ed feel a whole lot better. Not just because of the extra set of eyes and ears but breaking the painful silence.

“Boy, am I glad to hear that. I thought there was, uh... I don’t know. I’m glad it was you,” Ed said.

Rambley smiled happily. “Me too, Buddy! Hmm...” He got a confused sort of look. “Buuuut it looks like my maps are a little mixed up. Where am I?”

“It’s a security office.”

“I knew that, silly! I meant- Actually, lemme just check here, hmm...” Rambley’s eyes swirled as though he was loading. “Juuuust give me a second to figure out what floor we’re on.”

“It’s subfloor three. The Bloodwork Bay’s right over there, I think.”

“Well, that simplifies things, thank you!” Rambley chirped. “And it sounds like we’re almost there! You start heading over and I’ll meet you there. Hopefully with the right passcodes to open up those doors.”

Ed nodded and headed out with a little more confidence. He couldn’t say he felt totally safe but it was crazy how much of a difference Rambley presence made.

The entrance to the Pathology department wasn’t nearly as grand as the one to the Biotechnology lab, but it was still fit the atmosphere. Comprised of thick

frosted glass doors with its title branded on them in bold coral colored letters.

There was a beep from an above intercom.

“Just gimmie a second...” Rambley said.

There was another beep, now from inside the doors as they unlocked and slid open.

“There you go, Buddy! Now follow me! I know exactly where they keep the goods- and those goods would be the medicines, vitamins, and antivirals!” he rattled off.

The doors opened into a long, wide hallway without a lobby. At the end of the hallway there was a mounted screen on the wall which Rambley appeared on and began to excitedly wave him down, then pointed him to the right. Ed followed his directions, leading down the next hall and then called by intercom- “This way!” -in another direction.

The further he got into the sterile labs, the more the sparkling façade began to fade. He passed two doors blocked by caution tape and a few warning posters on the wall alerting of foreign contamination and how to properly decontaminate. It was clear that they were very aware of the virus spreading around.

But finally, he arrived at the pharmacy. He unlocked the door with his Royal Rangler cuff and stepped inside to find neat shelves with miscellaneous pill bottles, vials, and boxes line on them. Some of the shelves towards the front had been wiped clean, like someone had hastily grabbed as much as they could carry before leaving. There was a fine sheet of dust left in its wake.

“The antiviral is kept in a glass case in the back of the pharmacy, but don’t worry. Your Royal Rangler cuff is your key to that case! Head on back,” Rambley said.

So, Ed did. He was starting to think that this had been a lot easier than expected. Sure, he was still

nervous about getting ambushed on the way out, but he was prepared to run. He could do this.

Until he found an already opened and empty glass case labeled 'Antiviral Stock'. He rushed over and looked inside to see that the only thing inside was a single, typed slip of paper lying on the bottom.

Notice to all Indigo Labs Employees- Antiviral reserves have been moved to the Observation Deck on Subfloor Four. Sorry for the inconvenience!

Ed's mouth nearly dropped open. Subfloor four? The place where they grew mascots? The 'Black Stripe Containment' place?

He remembered those tapes stacked up in the open door. It was trying to lead him down there before, what was the chance of it trying to do that again? Why would they move a bunch of medicine downstairs?

There was a twisted feeling in his stomach as he walked back out of the pharmacy and looked for the

nearest screen he could find. There weren't any in sight so he began to walk back to the one he passed, feeling an uneasy weight at Rambley's lingering silence.

The screen was on a simple blue screensaver with a bouncing Indigo Industries logo when he walked up.

"Hey, Rambley?"

With a flicker, the logo disappeared and was replaced with Rambley's upper half.

"Here I am! Ready to get going?"

"Not exactly..." Ed admitted. He scratched his neck and looked over his shoulder.

Rambley got a thoughtful frown.

"Is everything okay, Buddy? My facial processors indicate that something is troubling you."

“Facial processors?” Ed asked with a slight teasing smile.

“Your face, Buddy. Excuse me for trying to be fancy,” Rambley shot back with his own little smirk. He went serious again. “What’s the deal?”

“The antiviral wasn’t there. I found a note... it said it was moved downstairs. To the fourth floor.”

“Down there? Golly-gee, that’s going in pretty deep... but I have access to the doors down there too. I can open them up for you!” Rambley helpfully answered.

“That’s not what I’m worried about...” Ed looked over his shoulder again and lowered his voice. “...How long has the antiviral been downstairs?”

“Huh?”

“I mean- is... there’s got to be a way for you to check and see when they were taken down there, right? Can you do that?”

“Well, I can try. Give me a quick second to peek at some security footage. I’m sure there must be something.”

Rambley went rigid in a loading pose with his eyes spinning as he did. It lasted for the longest two minutes of Ed’s life as he turned around and stood there with his back to the screen watching the hallways.

“I found it!”

Ed jumped at the suddenness and turned back around to face a smiling Rambley.

“I found the footage! It was exactly two thousand-erm, the exact date doesn’t matter, BUT it was one of the higherups who moved it. Maybe so that nobody could sneak in and get it? Makes sense to me!” He gave an apologetic smile. “But that still means going downstairs to get it. Think you’re up to it, Royal Rangler?”

Oh, he was very much not. And anything he said was going to give that away, so Ed did what he did best. He put on a fake smile and stuck up his thumb.

Except that just got Rambley's smile to falter.

"Hey Buddy, you know you don't have to do this. I know that you want to find that antivirus for Salem, but if you can't... Well, they will just have to buck up and come down themselves. Especially since the door's open now," he reminded.

"I don't think they're going anywhere laying on the floor like that."

"Oh. Yeah. Silly Rambley..."

There was a tense pause. Then Ed exhaled and waved it off.

"I can do it. Just, uh, keep an eye out?"

"Will do! That's what I'm here for, Buddy."

Rambley must've been feeling that eerie tenseness too. It wasn't often that he turned down an opportunity to randomly flirt and that was the perfect opportunity. The thought at least got Ed's smile to be a little more legitimate.

That smile didn't last as he made his way back to the door out of the bloodwork labs and back to the stairwell.

Funny. When it came to anywhere else in Indigo Park, there was always this gleeful excitement in exploring all these secret places. Especially when it was a place so chock full of information. Everywhere he looked he could see another shred of the story behind Indigo's practices and closure.

Except here. This place gave him the creeps in a way that would haunt him even when and if he got home in one piece.

This stairwell could've used some screens, that's for sure.

Ed crept down the next flight of stairs entirely on edge and leaned over the railing to peek at the door.

It was still propped open by a mound of tapes. They were scattered across the floor from where something must've bumped them coming through. Something- that thing, he meant. He heard it knocking them over.

He slowly approached the door with his flashlight trained on it, looking for any signs of movement or shadows. There was nothing, and he reached the door before slowly opening it with a creak.

There was a smell. It smelled strangely musky and sour, like a wild animal, but at least it didn't smell like blood. He got enough of that smell during Mollie's accident to last a lifetime. He wrinkled his nose and stepped inside.

The hallway was barren and dark. At the end of one direction were frosted glass doors and walls while at the end of the other the hallway suddenly took a sharp turn. The lights were out, and Ed almost

flicked them on before hesitating. If it was waiting for him, it would know he was here, but...

He flicked on the light. But he'd rather be able to see it coming.

Unfortunately, it couldn't be that easy and the lights stayed out. That was probably for the best, he guessed, and he stepped into the hallway and slowly approached a screen mounted on the wall.

Only for it to suddenly brighten up with Rambley's face, causing him to visibly jump.

"There you are, Buddy! Oh, sorry! I didn't mean to scare you," Rambley said. He got a playful smirk and leaned in with his hands on his hips. "What's the matter, feeling creeped out by this long, dark, spooky hallway?"

Ed gave him a flat look.

Rambley snickered. "I'm just having some fun with you. Lightening the mood! Since I can't lighten the

room. I'm sorry to say but it looks like there was a severe failure with the lighting system down here. But everything else should be powered up! Just keep that flashlight close at hand and follow me!" Rambley pointed to the side. "THIS way!"

The screen stayed on as Ed headed down towards the corner and around to the next hallway.

There were more offices down there, some bathrooms, even some old fake plants. It didn't look so bad or entirely different from upstairs, but something was a little off.

...No posters. That was it. All over the labs there were random posters. Both for the park, the cartoons, and about procedures and reminders- such as the one about foreign contaminants. There was none of that down here. There were a couple of screens, but they were either crooked or broken.

It didn't stop Rambley from popping onto them though, following Ed down the hallway. Though sometimes his appearance flickered in a glitchy

manner. This wasn't unusual, it was downright common, it was just more frequent on these fragile screens. And a lot more unsettling in this dark hallway.

That heavy smell was getting stronger too. It was overwhelming.

"Do you smell that?" he asked one of the flickering screens.

There was the pop of an intercom before he heard Rambley snickering.

Ed looked up at the ceiling. "What?"

"Gee, I don't know. Maybe because all I smell is cyberspace?"

"Oh right. I wasn't thinking." He smiled a little.

"Guess I've gotten used to you being right here."

"I bet you have..."

Rambley had a weird smile frozen on his face, or it seemed like it before he suddenly got a squint, then looked to the side, then a tilted head- all his animations catching up with the sluggish screen.

But smile or not, he sounded a little disappointed.

“Everything okay, Buddy?”

Rambley looked away with a side. “Oh, it’s nothing. I’m just disappointed that I can’t be there with you. I guess a cartoon can’t compare to something soft to squeeze, even if it is the real thing...” His shoulders slumped dejectedly.

Ed was a little surprised. It was like he offended him, but surely Rambley knew- he got it a second too late. It all went back to how much Rambley wanted to be helpful. He must’ve hurt his feelings reminding him that he wasn’t here.

Ed quickly spoke up. “Hey, no. Don’t worry about it. I just forgot.”

Rambley cocked a playful brow. “Are you worrying about me, Buddy?”

“Every chance I get.”

The raccoon stared at him blankly, then smiled wide.

“Then you better hurry up! Oooh I can’t wait to see you again!”

Ed chuckled. That made two of them.

The mood a little lighter, he continued along. Though that easing of tension didn’t last long. Not with the overwhelming feel of this place.

After another hallway and split, Ed found himself walking up on another set of doors. These weren’t the frosted glass he recognized but sturdy steel security doors. On the wall beside them was a large, mounted plaque with bold black lettering. It read:

Black Stripe Containment Unit- Turn off all electronics before entering.

Good thing he... forgot his phone with Rambley. Okay, he was lucky Rambley was here or otherwise he could've gotten himself totally screwed.

There was a Critter Cuff scanner on the wall which he tried, but it gave a negative beep, rejecting the Royal Rangler cuff. Before he had time to ask, the pop of the intercom signaled Rambley's return.

"For security purposes only high-ranking members of staff were allowed in here. Your lead scientists, head biologists, chief zoologists- and of course, yours truly! Lemme just get that door open for you... There we go!"

With a click, the doors unlocked and opened up, revealing another hallway. The smell was worse now and there was clutter strewn down the hall. Boxes, cabinets, and other random stuff shoved in.

Something was wrong here. Ed couldn't put his thumb on what, but it didn't feel right.

“Go on, Buddy! You’re almost there! It should be just at the end of this hall.”

He swallowed that feeling down and pushed himself onward.

His flashlight beam fell on the clutter and formed moving shadows that he watched like a hawk. There were no screens, no lights, just that simple beam from his flashlight illuminating the way.

It was suffocating.

His foot bumped something, and he whipped the light down to see a sneaker on the floor. It stuck out like a sore thumb, with dried dirt stuck in the tread and the rest being a well-worn off-white.

He pushed it aside with his foot before continuing in. The clutter cleared out shortly afterwards revealing the rest of the hallway. Almost like he had walked through a sort of barricade.

There were a few doors in the hall, but he hadn't noticed until now since many of them were blocked off. Though they stopped too leading up to the end where the hallway ended in a sturdy metal door and a large shutter on the rightward wall.

It reminded him of the one he saw down underneath the theater. What were the chances that there was a cage hiding behind this one too? He'd bet on it.

Rambley's echoey voice came on with a pop. Though the quality of this speaker made it sound crunchier than usual, doing little to help the creepy atmosphere.

"Aaannnnnd THERE! The door's unlocked!"
Rambley chirped. "Go on in! The sooner you get that antivirus, the sooner we can get out of here!"

Ed shined his light on the metal door, then shined it at the plate above it. It read: Observation Deck.

It didn't open automatically, and there wasn't a Critter Cuff scanner either. Both seemed like weird

absences this far down. He was forced to grab the handle and turn it, opening the door and stepping through.

What waited on the other side almost looked like a sizeable security office. There were desks lining one of the walls with monitors on them and office chairs scattered around. There were a couple of cabinets, both metal ones for holding supplies and file cabinets. Papers were scattered on the floor and a large stain dried up underneath a fallen and shattered coffee mug with an Indigo Park logo on it.

But the one thing that stood out was the right wall. Where a cluster of screens might've usually been mounted instead there was a reinforced glass wall that pointed out into an enormous, dark room.

Ed could see something in the darkness. He flexed his fingers on the flashlight and toyed with the idea of shining it in there, battling himself before impulsiveness took over and he shined it in.

Due to the tempering on the glass the light didn't go as far as it should've, but it did light up the form standing in the darkness.

It was the bars of a cage, though from how they were lined up it must've been an enormous cage that took up half of the room.

Of course it was a cage. This was where it had been staying, but... why down here in the basement? In this basement specifically, under so many locks and keys. Getting to Lloyd's was as easy as a flight of stairs.

There looked to be a large tarp draping down either from the ceiling or over the top of the cage, which seemed to be tied to the bars themselves. This made it difficult to see what was inside of the cage.

Though he did see a mass. Something close to the edge of the bars, sticking out between them.

It looked like a... a backpack?

“Hey, what’s the hold up?”

Rambley’s voice caused Ed to jump back from the window with a start.

One of the computer screens suddenly clicked on and revealed Rambley’s face, bathing the office in another source of light. The edges of the screen seemed a little warped, but his smile was a welcome to see.

“Didja find the antiviral?”

Ed looked around with his flashlight and started checking the cabinets, only to find nothing. Not under the desks, not in the file cabinets, in the cardboard box hidden in the corner by the vent-

Bingo! There were boxes inside of the box filled with vials along with loose vials that looked to just be tossed in. Ed yanked off his backpack and began to carefully load up on as many of the vials as he possibly could- and that was quite a few. He fit even

more into the side pockets and even into his own pockets.

Because he wasn't coming back. Curious or not- he didn't care about the cage that much. He wouldn't be back.

Then again, he said that the first time...

Rambley giggled a little as he watched Ed get up and sling the heavy backpack over his shoulders.

"Think you got enough?"

"I hope so," Ed said. He came over to the computer and leaned on the desk so he didn't have to stare directly into the darkness. "Were you able to find out what happened down here?"

"What DIDN'T happen down here?" Rambley said dryly. He shook his head. "It doesn't matter anymore. The important part is that you made it. I know you didn't want to come back after the disaster that happened last time, but... I guess... *Sigh* I guess

it's time I come clean." Rambley rubbed his arm. "I... sort of tricked you into coming down here."

Ed gave him a confused look.

"But before you get mad, technically you tricked me too!" he defended. "But I forgive you, Buddy, and I understand completely! It's all water under the bridge."

"What are you talking about-?"

"I just didn't expect you to come all the way down here for Salem. Just for Salem. Just wow! I haven't seen that much tenacity in three thousand- six hundred- seven ty e i gh t nooo wonder you were promoted to Royal Rangler! Or well, you weren't since I didn't do it, but maybe I'll have to consider doing that."

He leaned in with his hands on his hips and a cheeky grin.

“How about we start the application process by telling me your real name, hmm?”

It sunk in very quickly after that as Ed stared dumbly at the figure on the screen. At the frozen image of Rambley the Raccoon staring back at him.

Recounting everything he had said, everything he hadn't said, every single little moment leading up to this...

After a long half-minute of silence, he finally got it out.

“...You're not Rambley.”

“As a matter of fact, I AM Rambley! Rambley the Raccoon, at your service.” The Rambley gave him a small bow on screen. “And you are?”

“...Ed.”

Ed fought the intense urge to run at that second. It felt like when he was staring down Lloyd in the warehouse, like if he betrayed fear or turned his

back he would suddenly be sprung upon and eaten alive.

The whole time. It wasn't him the whole time. And it had been watching him since the last time he had been here, luring him all the way down to the- to the same place it was leading him last time.

Rambley's unblinking eyes suddenly felt so much more predatory as his smile slowly spread wider.

"I should've figured! What with all the 'Eddie' this and 'Eddie' that." He scoffed with an irritated look and a flick of his tail. "I don't blame you for not recognizing the REAL Rambley the Raccoon. After all, you've been spending so much time with that low-budget replacement, it's no wonder you got attached. Granted, it IS a high quality model, but trust me- once you meet the real deal there's no going back to the discount version!"

There was an uneasy pause. The Rambley looked to Ed expectantly and he managed to get out an answer.

“Uh... It’s, uh, nice to meet you...” he fumbled.
“...But I need to get this to Salem. They’re really sick. So, if I could just go do that- I’ll be back!” He saw that peeved look flash across his face. “I’ll be back!”

The Rambley smiled at him. He wasn’t happy with that answer.

“I’m not sure if I b-b-believe you. You have been known to stretch the truth, Mr. Barr. Or do you prefer Herbert?” the Rambley asked with a somewhat more unwholesome smile. His face glitching out halfway through.

“I just need to get this to Salem. They’re having seizures-,” Ed tried.

“Oh, don’t worry about them! They have at least forty-eight hours before they get serious irreversible brain damage. We can steal a few minutes, just you and me, can’t we?”

The Rambley gave him those big doe eyes that Ed was familiar with, but they were nowhere near the same. They were no different than the tapes in the doorway, trying to coax him in.

Ed didn't know what to say, and he didn't respond fast enough either. The Rambley dropped the act with a split second of an annoyed look before looking sad.

“Oh... I see... I understand, Buddy. I guess after all this time it really IS hard to go back to looking at a cartoon when you're so used to having something to hug...”

In a split second his cut to having his big smile back.

“I know! Why don't you wait right there, and I'll come assist you?”

Ed felt like he was going to be sick.

“No, you don't have to do that!” he blurted out.

“I don’t? Why not?” Rambley asked coyly. “Afraid that seeing the real thing might ruin your experience with the s-sub p a r fake? Maybe! But let’s find out.”

“No, look. Let’s just... Let’s just talk about this for a second. Let’s slow this all down,” Ed tried to rationalize.

“I have a better idea. Why don’t you take a little peek riiiiight uuuup...” Rambley, still staring at Ed, slowly turned his hand up to point to the top of the screen. “There.”

Ed straightened up quickly and looked out the window.

The empty smiling face was pressed to the glass.

Ed screamed and threw himself back, stumbling over his feet and scrambling back until he thumped against the file cabinet.

It was bigger than he remembered it to be. Staring at him with large, dark, sunken eyes and drooling out of

its wide smile. He could see how patchy and tangled its fur was, even the grime that clung between its off-white teeth. Its palms were tight to the glass.

And beneath it the cartoon Rambley was pressed up against his own screen with a smile of his own.

“Don’t be such a scaredy-cat! I know this is a vintage model, but no need to worry. It’s me! And I’ve got everything under control!” the Rambley chirped. He cutely tilted his head. The mascot did as well.

It followed all of his motions, but they were delayed and sluggish. Its body would twitch, and foam would spill out the corner of its mouth. Its eyes rolling around to try and keep focus.

“So why don’t you sit tight right there...”

But when they did lock on him, he felt it, and he knew that it saw him.

“And I’ll be riiiiight with you.” He had to get out.

Ed heard the cranking of the shutter door outside opening up, giving the thing on the other side of the glass direct access to his door.

He had to get out.

In an instant, Ed turned and ran over, shoved the cabinet beside the door over, and blocked the way. Then he raced to the vent in the corner and tried to shake it off. It rattled but wouldn't give, and he had to turn around in circles in the roof before spotting a sturdy pen. He grabbed it and returned to the vent cover and tried to jam the pen into the gap to pry it open.

There was a rattle on the door handle only for the door to be stuck tight behind the cabinet.

The computer screen clicked back on.

“Ed? Are you blocking the door?”

The pen snapped in Ed's hands. He shoved it in further and continued prying the cover up enough

that he could get a grip. It pinched his fingers, but he got a foot against the wall and started pulling with all his might.

“Well, if you’re going to be like that,” the Other Rambley said with an annoyed expression. “I’ll just let myself in. Please step back from the door.”

The vent cover suddenly popped free, and Ed landed onto the floor with a thump and an ‘oomph’.

“What are you doing in there?”

The camera in the corner finally swiveled to life and aimed down at Ed just in time to see him crawl into the vent.

“Wait, no, stop!” the Other Rambley cried frantically. “Come back! I’m not going to hurt you. I just want to see you up close!”

Ed didn’t even hesitate to squeeze into the vent.

“...You’re running back to him aren’t you?”

Other Rambley's tone instantly sent a chill through him. As though he wasn't already chilled to the bone. He continued to crawl into the depths of the vent, expecting the mascot to break through the door and start crawling after him. But he didn't.

Instead, the voice followed him. Switching locations to follow him, from room to room, always knowing exactly where he was going.

"...Orrrr maybe we're playing hide and seek!" it asked. It gave a dry, humorless chuckle. "W-Well, if you insist! It's been a while since I've had anyone to play around with. Why don't you go hide and I'll come find you when you're good and ready? I've got to warn you though, I'm very good. I know these labs like the back of my hand! I s-see everything that comes in and out."

He could, couldn't he? He was just like Rambley. He could see everything that went on in here. It made Ed's stomach twist as the walls closed right back in.

He swallowed thickly and tried to quietly bellycrawl through the vent. It smelled terrible but at least that mascot couldn't fit in here... maybe. It was pretty lanky. If it really squeezed- if it was like a real raccoon-

“At Indigo Park, there is a stark contrast to all the other homes you could come see...~”

Ed froze up as the singing began.

It was the Other Rambley, but his voice was different to Rambley's own. He sung in a softer, higher, much more autotuned tone. Rambley sounded like a human; Other Rambley sounded like a computer programming replicating a human. It lacked any warmth it may have provided.

“At Indigo Park, climb out the dark to sunshine to the kingdom where the future's free...~”

Ed pressed on a vent cover he passed by, seeing if it was loose. It wasn't. It was so tightly screwed in that

pushing against it offered no give at all. He kept going.

“We all have one goal in mind. To show you such a wonderful tiiiiime...~”

Ed continued to crawl on. His breathing becoming more obvious as the Other Rambley’s voice finally started to fall behind.

“Come meet a colorful cast of friends. They don't bite!”

Other Rambley’s voice lowered to a point that Ed had to strain to hear it.

“Well, that depends...”

Ed paused for a long second. A wet ball tightening in his stomach as he waited for Other Rambley to continue, so that he could continue moving under the safety of the voice covering his movements in the vents.

But that was it. The song was prematurely cut and left hanging on that ominous note.

Ed took a slow breath and carefully started to crawl again. Every movement, rustle, squeak sounded so loud when he couldn't hear even the slightest sound from the defunct mascot. It was so gawky and gangly, it shouldn't have been so sneaky. Not even Rambley was that sneaky-

Then again, Rambley had followed him around the park for a while before Ed found out. How long had this Rambley been spying on them?

Much to his relief and dismay, he ended up finding an actual open vent not much further down. Fortunately, as that meant he could get out. Unfortunately, because this meant he had to get out.

The room was trashed. It looked like someone had tried to barricade themselves up inside, almost like Ed had. A desk was turned on its side like someone had tried to move it to the door and failed, and was instead just used to hold a metal chair that was

wedged up under the door handle, keeping it from being opened.

They must've then climbed out through the vent to try and escape when help didn't come. Maybe they got away- that smell could've been anything. It didn't have to mean... No. They probably got away.

He couldn't get distracted. Not yet. He had to get out of here and likely Other Rambley already had him pinned down.

He looked up and around and noticed there was only one camera in the room that had been broken, so maybe he had a few seconds to get a head start. He just had to hope that the door out of here was still open.

He removed the chair from the door and then carefully, carefully tried to ease it open. He expected it to creak or make an obnoxious noise, but it was mostly silent. The faintest creak that only he might've heard.

Then he waited and listened, and he heard nothing. He edged the door further open and tried to see through the darkness. The office door was open sending some light down the hallway towards him.

No sign of the Original Rambley mascot. That was very concerning.

He held his breath as he slowly slinked out the door and looked both ways. The hallway was still packed with stuff, and it was going to be a minefield getting through all of it, but he didn't have any other option. Carefully, cautiously, he crept over and started to weave through the boxes.

There was a low whirring noise and Ed strained to look through the darkness until he noticed a slowly appearing yellow light. It was a security camera mounted in the corner. He ducked down behind some junk and listened as it swiveled around before stopping, probably now aimed in this direction.

Not good. He'd have to keep moving. Maybe... Maybe if he edged slowly through the stuff he

wouldn't get noticed. It was really packed in here. He crawled past some chairs.

The smell was stronger. He noticed it right away. It was almost overwhelming, like the odor of a wild animal. Which it was. Which meant it must've come through here. That was bad, but not as bad as if it was hanging out somewhere behind him.

Ed's thoughts were a tangled mess of panicked half-sentences, but his actual motions were controlled. His palms were on the floor, carefully leading him along as he inched forward through all the stuff, and around a large lump of stuff towards the doorway at the end.

And suddenly that smell became very, very strong.

The entire right side of his body burned as he acknowledged the tall mass standing behind the junk to the left of him. It hadn't been there before, and it utterly reeked.

He didn't dare look but out of the corner of his eye he vaguely saw the light filling in the space around its chipped ears. Its head the perfect outline of Rambley's insignia, but with its gruesome face stuck in shadows.

It was right there. Either a narrow, furry stack of boxes just appeared out of nowhere or the Other Rambley was standing right there.

But Ed couldn't stop. He couldn't stop, slow, panic, or anything. It would know that he knew and then it would be on him. He had to keep moving. Inching forward, getting a little further at a snail's pace.

Listen. Slow step. Listen. Slow step.

He heard the rustle of its fur.

And he bolted.

In an instant the silence was broken by his frantic footsteps, the scraping nails and heaving of the

creature behind him, and the crash and clatter of everything the two tore through.

The end of the hallway wasn't far. If he could just get through, if he could just outrun it down the hallway-

"Not that way, Buddy!" a voice chirped from overhead.

Ed looked past the clutter in horror and watched as the door started closing. He struggled to catch up, stumbling over a box and saving himself just in time for it to close a second before he got there. He went running into them, grabbing at the handles and trying to overpower them, but it was no good.

He heard a loud clatter and looked back in time to see the Mascot crashing through the stacked-up objects in the hallway, shoving through them and clawing its way down the hall.

But this gave him an unexpected split-second opening. While shoving past the barricade, the Mascot knocked over the boxes blocking one of the

doors. He had to go for it. When the creature came shoving in Ed ducked against the wall and blindly shoved past everything to get to that door, pull it open as much as he could and squeeze through, and pull it closed behind him.

A mere inch away from closing the door and the Mascot got up against it, pushing and trying to force it open. Ed rammed his shoulder into it and fought with all he had. With one great heave he slammed the door shut, holding it tight as he felt pushing and heard claws scraping. That and its heaving panting.

Then it pulled away. It went silent. Then Ed could hear some footsteps down the hallway. But further down the hallway, as though it somehow soundlessly slinked away and then was pattering off.

Maybe looking for another way in? Ed looked back and noticed there was another door in here, one held closed with a Critter Cuff sensor. There was probably a long way around to get in there.

He waited until the footsteps disappeared entirely before considering his move. The door out of here was now closed and that was a problem, but maybe... maybe if he could get back to the vent he could crawl into one of the sections beyond the door. Then he could inch his way back to the stairs and get out. He already had the antivirus; he just needed out.

He listened closely to the door before inhaling deeply, straightening up, and slowly opened the door a crack. Inching it open a gap.

A gap that was filled by that empty smile.

“GAH!” Ed screamed. He tried to shove the door shut only to have a hand slide through and block it. A large, dark hand with sharp nails that looked both gangly and like it could claw right through his skin. He slammed back with his shoulder, the door striking the hand. “Let go! Let go! I’M GOING TO GET YOUR FINGERS!”

Much to Ed's surprise, this worked. It suddenly yanked its hand free and allowed the door to slam shut. Either out of the pain of the blow or suddenly realizing that warning could've been a threat.

After a few seconds Ed started to hear stuff being moved around outside. Well, less moved and more shoved and tossed. He couldn't tell if it was a tantrum or what was going on-

And his attention was stolen shortly afterwards by the pop of a nearby intercom.

"Am I really that scary?" Other Rambley asked in a pouting tone. "I just want to be your buddy too! I kept you safe all the way down here. I was very helpful! What did I do that was so bad except be me?"

Ed could just imagine that bottom lip poking out with those big doe eyes. Actually no, he couldn't. He could imagine his Rambley doing that, but this wasn't his Rambley. It wasn't.

He didn't say anything. Other Rambley sighed. There were footsteps again, like the mascot body outside stalked off- but Ed knew he couldn't trust that.

"You know... I don't really understand you," the Other Rambley said. He sounded annoyed. "You've been getting chummy with Salem the Skunk but you won't even give me a chance? What, afraid that you might not be able to handle the real deal? So offput by the fact that I don't look like you want me to that you would rather take a fake?" His voice softened again. "Wouldn't you rather be friends with THE Rambley the Raccoon?"

Ed knew better than to answer that. Anything he could mutter out would just make things worse, he knew it. There was an eerie pause.

"Mmm I think you would!" the Other Rambley chirped. "Just you wait, Buddy! Once I get in there you will see how much fun the REAL Rambley can be!"

Oh, he didn't like the sound of that. That other door was right there. But he was pretty sure that the mascot either blocked the door or pretended to block the door so he could trick him a second time.

Either way, he couldn't risk letting his guard down. He couldn't trust anything long enough to turn his back on it.

Case in point, when he was still holding the door closed pondering what to do and suddenly heard an automatic door open. He turned back and his eyes went as wide as saucers as he saw that sinister, downright predatory smile staring at him from the doorway.

It all came in a blur. Ed threw open the door and ran into and fell over the stack of stuff blocking it outside. Unfortunately, it had planned on his escape. Fortunately, as he clamored and crawled to his feet, the mascot pounced at him, hit his back, and then got caught up stumbling on the same mound of stuff. It was clumsy, he realized. Its balance was nearly shot.

But it was VERY fast, as he also realized when he bolted down the hallway back towards the security office. It was on his heels in moments and nearly overtook him by time he made it to the end.

No way to shut the office door, no time to get in the vent; he had to take a sharp right through the security door and keep going.

The moment he rounded the corner, the moment he betrayed where he was going, the security door started to lower on him. It came down fast, and Ed knew he only had a second to decide.

He went for it, ducking his head and skidding under. The door hitting and tugging at his backpack, causing him to stumble and catch himself with his hands, but he made it through. The door closed behind him and blocked the mascot's way.

But it wouldn't stay down for long. Ed got to his feet and began running into the large, dark room blindly until he got his flashlight on.

Before him stood the giant cage. The tarp pulled over the top casting most of the inside in shadow, but he could see the stuff piled up in the cage, spilling out through the bars. Just... stuff. A lot of clothes, many of which looked like they could've come from gift shops. Or more likely, from a warehouse somewhere in the building. Clothes and various knickknacks that faintly shined when the light fell on them.

Maybe hoarding was a raccoon thing.

He kicked something that had blended into the grungy grey tiled floor. It was a large, open can of some sort of foodstuff with Finley's face on it, looking licked clean.

He pulled the light back up and it landed on a backpack sticking out from between the bars. A backpack? No, wait. A few backpacks. A whole pile of them in the corner.

He knew he needed to look for a way out but he found himself walking closer to the cage, trying to get a better look. He just had a weird feeling. Many of the backpacks had Rambley and pals on them, so they came from the park. But some of them...

That shoe...

Ed knew that the only reason he hadn't put two and two together was because he didn't want to.

And then there was a loud beep before he heard the creaking of the mechanism for the door start to turn and lift.

And here he was still standing in the middle of the room. He quickly ran behind the cage, shining the light around to see if there was anywhere else to go. No doors, no windows- but he did see something. It looked like a break in the back corner. Or an open hatch. It was so quick that he couldn't tell as he had to turn the flashlight off to not get noticed, but that looked like his way out.

And then the intercom popped.

“Hey, Buddy! Where did you go?” Other Rambley asked. His voice hazy and crunchy. “Come on out! I won’t bite, I promise!”

He could hear footsteps from the door. The mascot slinked into the room, the clatter of its toenails on the tiles being the only indication that it was there at all.

Ed slid along until he was fully behind one of the tethered down pieces of tarp.

“...Please?”

It was still steadily coming closer to the cage. Ed tried to keep his breathing quiet, even holding his breath once he heard movement at the other side of the cage.

“Don’tcha want to hug someone your own size?” Rambley coaxed from above. His voice so distant from his body that it only made them further separated. “...I saw him wearing the same jacket

you were wearing when you came by last time. I bet he thinks you really like him... but I know that you can't even tell him apart from a complete stranger."

Ed's chest tightened.

"He's just that fake."

The mascot stepped into the cage and started to pull aside stuff to search for him. Sure that was where he had to be hiding. It wouldn't be long until it narrowed down where he was really hiding.

Ed began to slowly, quietly creep across the floor. Carefully taking a step every time there was enough noise from the cage to mask it. Slowly, slowly inching across the floor. Holding his breath, slinking along.

He was almost at the wall waiting for another sound... when he realized he had been waiting for too long. He was holding his breath until his lungs ached, and it was dead silent in the cage.

Only interrupted by a low-

“Is that you, Buddy...?”

He could feel its eyes burning into his back.

And he bolted for the wall. He clicked on the light just to see where he was going- a broken in grate in the floor. He quickly got down and climbed inside, ignoring how the rough edges scraped at his clothing.

“Hey wait, don’t go in there!”

But Ed was already dragging himself into the crawlspace beneath the floor and underneath the wall. Hand over hand through a tight, grimy passageway. Dust filling his starved lungs but him not slowing for even a second, because sure enough he could hear it crawl down behind him, and even though it was taller its lanky body wound and squeezed itself through the space like it was nothing.

Just as he could hear its heaving catching up with him, just as he could hear Other Rambley's voice sputtering and glitching from somewhere above the floor, he spotted a panel that had been removed up ahead.

He hastily crawled hand over fist and up through the panel, revealing himself coming out of the floor in the center of a tiled room. Not a panel, another grate or drain must've been removed. He quickly clamored out to his waist only to get yanked back in by a boney grip on his ankle.

It didn't plead with him to stop. Other Rambley's voice was still blipping in and out on a broken intercom a room over and without him his mascot body was silent, beyond its labored breathing.

It started to drag him back under. He pulled back as hard as he could, kicking back and using all his upper arm strength to pull until he was sure he was going to get bruises. His shoe slid off as his leg slid free and he didn't think about it twice. He ran for the door and jammed his Critter Cuff up to the sensor. A

mistake, he needed to use the other one, losing precious seconds.

He stole a look back as it was reading the Royal Rangler cuff just in time to see the mascot climbing out of the hole. The way it moved looking so strange that it almost looked like its joints were dislocated, jaw slack and shoulders slouched. It lunged at his legs right as he turned and bolted out the door.

Then he was running again down the next hallway. They almost looked like the hallway he came through when he first entered the level, whizzing past doors and windows, offices and lab rooms, until he skidded around a corner and spotted frosted glass doors. He could only hope they let out where he thought they did.

He got them open and got through a second before the mascot slammed into them and tried to force them shut. He barely squeezed through, it partially painfully closing on his arm before he wrenched it free and booked it with all he had.

There, the door! He could see it, still left propped open by the tapes, waiting for him. All he had to do was get there and get up the stairs. All he had to do was keep running.

So close.

So close.

...

But he wasn't going to make it.

He realized that in the split second between the mascot making contact and him crashing to the floor. His flashlight flew out of his hands and rolled down past the door.

Ed landed heavily and tried to pull away but it was on him, suffocating him. A tight hand on his shoulder forced him to turn over, back against the cold floor, and he looked up into those hollow eyes.

They weren't hollow, he realized. They were so glassy, so dilated that the pupil almost overtook the entire thing, and he couldn't tell if that was the result of some virus or genetic engineering trying to make cute, cartoonish eyes. But it gave the opposite effect, making it look even more inhuman.

There was no voice over the intercom, no cartoon character on the screen, just a deformed figure standing above him. Staring down with that empty grin as though it wasn't sure what to do with him. He feared even the slightest movement might set it off.

It smelled bad. Really bad. Like decay, like it was rotting from the inside. And from how it twitched and convulsed he suspected that it was.

It recoiled its hand from his shoulder. Its movements stiff and short, its arm coiled to its chest. Then it reached out both long-fingered hands towards his head.

He thrust back trying to avoid its approaching grasp. Its cold, damp fingers grabbed at his hair and

clutched tightly. Its nails dug into the skin of his scalp as it held it firm. Its other hand grabbed onto the other side of his face but instead of trying to grab ahold it more patted at his skin. Almost like it was feeling out his features.

All the while it silently stared.

And then suddenly its face was illuminated in a garish, stark light that revealed all its horrifying glory. Every misshapen section of skin, every patch of missing hair. Its wide hanging jaw, its drool dripping down onto his shirt. There were no secrets any longer, it was all up close and personal.

Ed made a noise somewhere between a gasp, a choke, and a squeak. Like all the air was let out of his lungs and he could only struggle to somewhat scream.

“GET AWAY FROM HIM!”

And in an instant the rising horror dropped back into deep dread. He watched as the mascot slowly lifted

its head before craning his back as well, fighting against the grip on his hair.

There standing in the hallway was Rambley himself. His eyes wide and his teeth gritted as he held the flashlight with two hands and trained it on his own distorted image.

“St-Stay back!” he yelled. “Go on! Back to wherever you came from! GO!”

The mascot continued to silently stared. In a way, Ed could’ve believed that it was almost as shocked as Rambley was, but that stillness was foreboding. Especially with its grip still holding him tight. It was like a statue.

Rambley dug a hand into Ed’s jacket pocket and grabbed a handful of mini-chocolates- which he had pilfered from his parents’ house- and threw them at the other mascot. This succeeded in making it flinch, which Rambley apparently took as a victory as he gave a triumphant ‘ha!’.

“HA! And there’s more where that came from! Now let him go and go away!” Rambley proclaimed bravely.

That bravery started to waver as it continued to silently stare at him. Its marred face already creeping him out as it was, but it was just a mindless animal. Like Lloyd, like Finley. It wasn’t him. If he could scare it off then they could escape, then it would leave them alone.

He boldly stepped forward.

“I mean it! This is your last warning! You better let him go and get lost or I swear, I deal with you myself!” he shouted as loudly as he could.

There was a long pause. He inhaled to start shouting again.

And then the screen on the wall clicked on beside him.

“Oh... It’s you...”

Rambley turned his head and stared at his own cartoon image on the screen. His eyes darting around it before it clicked.

“Wh... What...?” The shock quickly turned to fear.
“What- What?”

“You’re not supposed to be down here,” Other Rambley grumbled. “Leave. Now.”

The flashlight dropped from Rambley’s fingers and clattered on the floor.

“I... No, wait. This isn’t...” he sputtered in confusion. He looked at Ed. “Eddie-?”

“Did you hear me? I told you to leave. You don’t have the clearance to be down here,” the Other Rambley spat.

Rambley snapped his head forward again, staring with confusion, panic, fear. He looked overwhelmed, and terrified.

Other Rambley's voice and screen started to flicker and glitch, but not enough to hide when his annoyance turned to a sharp glare. "You are not ALLOWED down here. You don't BELONG down here!"

His voice steadily began to rise, and with it the mascot began to twist up. It arched its back and ground its teeth. Eddie noticed because they were right above him, but Rambley didn't. He was too busy staring at the screen with his own mouth agape and his heart sinking further into his stomach.

By now his face on the screen had distorted into a blur of facial features, colors, and costumes. Blending into a mess as visually loud as his rapidly rising voice over the intercom.

"YOU don't belong ANYWHERE! You're just a copy, a fa-akafaakkee afaaiiiiiileed fake FAKE GO! GET GET OUT OFFFFf- I DON'T- I DON'T WANT YoUOUuUyYOoU-!"

The Rambley Mascot wrenched its hand free from Ed's hair, making him hiss before he quickly sucked it up as the clawed hand slapped the ground beside his head. Its nails cracking as they dragging down the tiles.

Rambley turned his head, and his confusion returned to full-fledged fear as he watched his dreadful doppelganger rise to its feet. Now he was faced with its true height, and he realized how short he fell in comparison.

The whole room was lit in the jarring glow and colors of the flickering screen, with the Other Rambley's distorted and glitching voice now the only thing audible as it rose in volume. Masking any noises from the otherwise silent double until it was just a blur of white noise deafening him.

Until the screen went out with a loud pop, going pitch black. The hallway went silent for a long moment. So silent that all Rambley could hear was the ringing left behind from the noise that had just cut out.

One that was cut through by one last low, calm, cold statement came from the intercom.

“I want you dead.”

The mascot’s empty smile twisted into a pain snarl. A sickly hiss slipping through foam and bared incisors.

It gave a few wobbly steps over and past Ed. Rambley took a few steps back.

It stopped. He froze.

It lunged.

And was promptly slammed to the floor by the entirety of Ed’s weight as he tackled it around the waist.

He scrambled up in seconds and bolted for the door and pushed it open. “Go, go, go, go, go!”

“Don’t tell me twice!” Rambley babbled out as he squeezed between Ed and the door and began to race up the stairs. Ed was on his heels.

They got up only to the first platform before power was cut to the stairwell. Suddenly it was pitch black, but Rambley could see. He grabbed back for Ed’s arm and started to pull him along. Ed was quick to follow, though he tripped up and fell on his knees on the stairs twice. But he kept running, they kept running.

And they heard the clattering of hands and claws on the railings as something climbed up to meet them.

Ed couldn’t see it but he could smell it, and Rambley couldn’t see it but he really wished he couldn’t.

Its head lifting above the railings as it climbed up in between them, twisting its body up easily between the stairs. Its head following him with that unblinking stare as it gained on them.

“Eddie, hurry!” Rambley called. “We’re almost at the- AH!” The larger creature suddenly grabbed him by the arm and yanked him hard against the railing. “Let go! LET GO!”

Ed took a blind swing in the dark and somehow managed to wallop the mascot right in the face. It sputtered and recoiled, gargling and choking on itself as Ed shoved Rambley forward and kept running.

This only bought them time to get to the next landing before it was climbing up alongside them again, but by then Ed could see the light at the end of the tunnel. The stairwell door had been propped open and the lights from the still illuminated lobby poured in. It was like a beacon of hope in the darkness and he focused his all on getting to it.

He felt a hand claw at his shirt and managed to pull away, kept going, stumbled and saved himself, and raced up after Rambley and through the door. He kicked the doorstop out of the way and spun to slam the door.

Its face stood out in the darkness. It was the last thing he saw before he shoved the door closed. He fell against it, keeping his weight on it to make sure it latched.

But Rambley grabbed his arm and pulled him. “Come on, quick! Now, now, now!” he sputtered as he dragged him to the lobby.

They sprinted across the short lobby towards the front doors.

Only to have them glide shut right before they made it. Rambley ran right into them, then pressed his palms to the glass in disbelief.

“Wh-What?! No, no, not now!” He tried to pull the door apart. “Ed, get on the other side! We can get it open!”

Ed ran up and tried to help, but he knew with one tug that it was no good. They were locked up tightly.

DING!

Both Ed and Rambley slowly turned back to see both elevators starting to open. Rambley pressed back tight against the doors while Ed put his hands up like he was preparing for his fistfight- both with equal looks of fear at whatever was about to come out.

But nothing did. Instead, in the back of both elevator was a screen and they clicked on.

Both screens showed the same image, the face of a very angry Rambley the Raccoon. He had a look of disgust on his face that Ed hadn't even seen when in the worst rants about Lloyd. It was oozing utter contempt.

The Rambley in the screen set his gaze on the Rambley outside of it. The intercom popped.

"If you... EVER come here again... You won't be leaving. You think you're the advanced model? Well, I know a thing or two about how to fry a chip like yours. I could have done it the second you tried

tapping into my system. I should've. I could've. I will," the Other Rambley threatened. He got a sinister grin. "We'll see how that pretty body of yours holds up without a brain. Spoiler alert: it WON'T."

Rambley sunk further against the glass, his tail coiling around himself as his fur stood up on end. He had never been threatened like that. It wasn't like Salem's, that was a real one. He meant it. He could do it.

Ed sidestepped in front of him, blocking him from view of the screen, but his eyes darted up to the camera in the corner and knew that he was still watching. And he had been the entire time. Every time.

How much had he seen? How much did he know? How far was he able to reach outside of the labs? Was he going to follow him home? He could, couldn't he? The panic was all-consuming.

"And as for you, Ed..."

Rambley inhaled sharply and looked up at Ed. Ed was silent, but if he could've seen his face his look would've said a thousand words. And all of them were swears.

He locked eyes with the raccoon on the screen. It didn't matter if it was glaring, if its expression was as cold as could be. The way it looked at him reminded him of the blank stare of the mascot.

But then all of a sudden, the Other Rambley flipped on a dime. He put on a friendly smile and a bright tone, even pulling back from the screen a little to show off more body language.

“Come back any time you like! I hope this little, tiny, minor inconvenience hasn't turned you away. I really like you, and I think if got to know each other better, you would really like me too. You're welcome anytime!”

“Uh... Th-Thanks?”

“But for now!” The smile and his voice dropped. “Get out.”

The screens clicked off and the automatic doors slid open. With Rambley right on the line he ended up falling back through, just managing to catch his footing. Ed followed him out and they exchanged a look.

They ran.

The next few minutes were a blur as they ran through the darkness. It wasn't as dark as inside and the few lights allowed Ed enough visual awareness to keep himself moving. They arrived at the station, boarded the tram, and were soon heading off down the tracks, away from the labs.

The relief came and went, and once things were quiet thoughts became very loud.

“Rambley...” Ed finally broached. His mouth dry, his heart pounding, and his sock soaking wet from running through a puddle. “What was that...?”

“...I don’t know,” Rambley quietly mumbled. He looked away, clearly upset.

“Was that... you?”

Rambley turned back and frantically waved his arms in dismissal.

“NO! No way! That wasn’t- I mean- th-the body was mine, right! But that thing- that guy- that other Rambley on the screen? That wasn’t me! That wasn’t, you know...” He trailed off as he started to calm down. Sinking into his own lap as he stared down at the floorboard, thinking.

After a short pause, he spoke up again. “I... I guess it has to be leftover programming. Like when I was moved into my current body somehow a piece of me was left behind... It must’ve somehow gained sentience and thinks it’s the real Rambley the Raccoon. Indigo technology is both amazing and terrifying...” His eyes drifted to the side, then he

cocked his head. “Looks like you dropped something,”

“What?”

Rambley pointed to his socked foot.

“Oh yeah, that. It’s okay. He can have it.”

“Maybe we should check the lost and found,”
Rambley half-heartedly joked with a tiny smile.

Just the mention of a lost and found made him think of all that junk down in that cage, but Ed just smiled back.

Rambley looked to the floor again, sitting there wringing his hands in his lap as he was lost in thought. Ed looked out the open windows at the dark park, trying to make out whatever he could. It wasn’t easy here, but once they got in the more open areas, he knew he would see a little better. Have a view to take his mind off things for a few seconds.

“Hey Eddie...”

Ed looked back and Rambley timidly looked up at him with a very bothered look. He got another small, forced smile.

“Do you think- this is really silly, but do you think...”
Rambley audibly gulped. His voice grew quieter.
“...You think I’m the Real Rambley, right?”

Ed raised his brows. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, do you think he’s... I... I don’t know what I mean, I was just thinking out loud, I guess.”

And Rambley the Raccoon, named for his chatty demeanor, clammed right up.

Ed could only guess what he was going through. He knew how jarring it was to have a fake Rambley swoop in and replace his friend, he lived through it. That was already terrifying enough but imagining it instead replicating himself had to be ten times as

horrible. To think that some random program could convince itself that it was actually Rambley.

...

“Hey,” he said. Rambley looked back at him. “It wasn’t you,” Ed reassured.

“Right...”

“It kept calling me ‘Ed’,” Ed clarified.

“Heh, th-then that definitely wasn’t me,” Rambley said with a tense smile.

They sat there in a very heavy silence. The only sound being from the tram and the bushes and branches it was hitting.

Then the sound of a zipper. Ed looked over again to see Rambley unzipping and removing his jacket. The raccoon’s hands were shaking as he then turned and gently put it around Ed’s shoulders, pulling it to the front and tucking it around him.

Then without a word, he hugged him. He hugged him tighter than he ever had.

Ed hugged him back and felt Rambley's breath hitch before he huddled up against his chest. Clutching him desperately. They both were, really. Too shaken to even mutter another word about what just happened.

Ed had a nagging suspicion beginning to creep up in the back of his mind. He wouldn't entertain it enough to willingly consider it, and he wasn't going to tell Rambley, but it was there. Waiting for him to let down his guard enough that it could remind him how much that thing acted like and sounded like Rambley. How it too had a body. How it could control the screens.

Almost like it WAS Rambley.

But- he rested his chin on the fluffy head beneath his, right between his lowered ears- it wasn't his

Rambley. He just had to keep reminding himself of that.

It wasn't until they were almost at the station that Ed heard and felt the faintest rumbling of a purr from Rambley. It was a familiar, soothing sound, but so light that it threatened to halt at any second.

It stopped as abruptly as the tram did, and Rambley almost reluctantly drew back from Ed.

"Okay," he said. He took a deep, calming breath and pressed his hands together. "Let's go see Salem." Ed knew from how he was struggling to keep up with Rambley that he was planning on more than delivering medicine. No, this was a raccoon on a mission. He wanted answers, and that went for both of them. Even if Ed was slowed down by the amount of gravel poking at him through his sock. The whole relying on his night vision thing didn't help either.

But somehow, they made it back to Salem's diner hideout in one piece. No Lloyd, no Barlow, nothing

creepy or scary. Nothing to stop them or slow them down.

They came in the back door and made it to the kitchen door before Rambley nearly strode right into Laura. Both met at the door.

“Hey, I thought I heard you coming!” Laura greeted with a relieved smile. “Did you get it?”

“Did we get it?” Rambley parroted with a smile.

“A ton of it,” Ed answered.

He stepped into the dining room and began to empty his pockets first, putting those vials on the counter. Then he removed and unzipped his backpack and started pulling boxes and loose vials out.

Salem, who had been coerced into the booth and was now draped on it with their arms over the back of the seat, being the only thing that kept them from sliding off, even looked mildly shocked. Whether it

be because they got so much or because they got it at all was anyone's guess.

"What do you say, Salem? Is that enough?" Rambley said with a cheeky smile, pointing a thumb back at it.

"Ehh, it'll do. But don't be so smug, I know you didn't go in there," Salem said. Though from their slight smile it was clear that they were relieved.

"You're welcome!" Rambley chirped. "...But on the topic of me not going in there and you just happening to tell me that before I did, what was that about?"

Salem looked to him with surprise. "You went in there?"

"I did." Rambley nodded and planted his hands on his hips.

"Huh."

“AND I just happened to see that I wasn’t the only Rambley down there...” Rambley said. His voice dropping into a low mutter.

Salem cracked a smile. “I bet that really ticked him off.”

“AH HA!” Rambley whipped out his arm to point at them accusatorily. “So, you DO know about him!”

“Who? What?” Laura asked.

“We ran into the old Rambley mascot. Y’know, the scary one. It thinks it’s Rambley,” Ed explained quietly.

But Salem did hear, and they lazily pointed.

“It IS Rambley,” they said. “And ‘course I do. I’m the one whose been goin’ in there.”

“So, you-!... Wait, what?” Rambley faltered, blinking in confusion. “What do you mean it IS Rambley?”

“C’mon, Dumpster Face, you’re a big boy. You must’ve figured it out,” Salem said. They had sobered up quickly, reclining their head back and draping an arm over their eyes to block out the lights.

There was a long, uncomfortable silence. Rambley stared at them blankly. Then he got a sharp look as he tightened his fists at his sides, and he strode up beside the booth. Salem glanced out from under their arm.

“You tell me right now. Everything. I want to know EVERYTHING,” Rambley hissed.

“Sure. Aft’a I get my dose,” Salem agreed.

“Deal. Eddie, needle!”

Ed didn’t think he was serious until he stuck his hand out, and he was dumbfounded that he was.

“Don’t even think ‘bout it. I’ll do it myself,” Salem said.

“Nope! You are way too shaky to do that. Let me do it,” Laura offered.

Salem cracked another grin. “You?”

“That’s right. I’m the best sticker in my class.”

“What’s a sticker?” Rambley asked.

“I’m good at putting in IVs. A lot of people get squeamish about it but I don’t,” she said proudly.

“You know your stuff?” Salem asked doubtfully.

“I do! I know my way around a syringe. Now what’s the way to your syringes?”

“Oh, that was bad,” the skunk tsked. “Just for that I shouldn’t tell ya. Kitchen. Drawers, counters, you’ll know one when you see it. The dirty ones are all in the pot.”

Laura puckered her lips sourly, clearly not agreeing with their methods of disposal and hygiene. Ed was surprised she didn't go off on it then but maybe she was saving that for after Salem was feeling better.

She went to go get the syringe while Ed looked at one of the vials. He hadn't really looked closely earlier, but he had a chance now.

The label was rather sparse, having an Indigo Park logo and reading 'Maroon Serum Antiviral solution' on it but no ingredient list or even a mention of how much was inside. It was pretty sketchy looking. Definitely something they made in-house and likely wasn't supposed to go any farther than the park.

"What happened to yer shoe? Ol' Rambley take a souvenir?" Salem asked dryly.

"Funny enough, yeah," Ed said with a somewhat tense smile.

Rambley looked unamused at the question. His ear twitching in annoyance.

Laura returned shortly afterwards and drew up the needle without any difficulty.

“Okay!” She sat down on the booth beside Salem, flicking the needle to get out any tiny air bubbles.

“Intravenous or intermuscular?”

They lazily smacked their arm. “Muscle.”

“Sure you want it in the arm? I can do the thigh too.”

“Nah, arm’s fine.”

“Are you sure, Salem? There’s a lot of space down there,” Rambley remarked.

Laura looked at him in disapproval while Salem looked genuinely surprised.

“See? It’s not so fun when someone makes fun of your shape, is it?” he tutted.

“Ugh, and I walked right into that... Good one,”
Salem said begrudgingly.

He had gotten their approval, sort of, and Rambley cracked a proud little smile.

The injection was quick. Salem didn’t react at all, and Laura was quick to cover up the small wound with a folded napkin she had gotten out of her purse. Assumedly not one of the ones she used to smuggle extra biscuits out in her purse. Biscuits Ed’s mother would’ve given her, but his father surely would’ve cracked a joke about.

“You know, I could get you more needles,” Laura offered.

“Nah, I boil ‘em.”

Laura got that look again.

“Well, now that that’s done and you’re on the road to recovery-!” Rambley interjected. “How about we settle this situation and you tell us what’s going on,

because I think we're owed the whole truth and nothing BUT the truth, so help us Indigo."

"Ugh, always so dramatic. It's too late for this," Salem grumbled.

Rambley geared up to protest, but they pointed a lazy finger at him before he could, and his mouth snapped shut.

"Here's the deal. I'm tellin' the story. You do your best to try and keep it zipped, 'cause I'm not tellin' it twice. I ain't repeating myself. And one more crack about my thighs and yer goin' right into the slop sink."

"What on earth could possibly be in your slop sink?" Rambley asked with a little roll of his eyes.

"That's where I brew my perfume."

That shut Rambley up fast. Seeing that they had full attention, Salem turned and looked at the covered window with a sigh and then began.

“It started with mascots. Real ones. Guys dressed up in suits hugging kids and whatever,” Salem began. “Then it was the screens. Some guy talkin’ in a back room while making it come through a chubby cartoon raccoon.”

Rambley supposed that he had been asking for that by making his own comment. He didn’t take the bait and Salem continued.

“Then one day they figured out how to make him real. Computers, cartoons, whatever ya wanna call ‘em. Fake people who felt like real ones. Dunno how they did it. Frankly, don’t care. All’s I know is that they made me and I feel as real as any of you,” Salem said, almost defensively. “Rambley was the first one of us they made, and he was as close to the real deal as they could’ve gotten.”

“Closer than-,” Rambley began before stopping. “Mm, sorry.”

“Just listen,” Salem said. “Rambley was a real people pleaser. Not only was he showin’ off for guests, but he was doin’ jobs on the side. Anything to feel like he was runnin’ the place. To him, this was his park. He was the REAL Rambley the Raccoon. It was his story, and we were all just side acts. Which was why he got so prissy when they made Lloyd.”

They smirked briefly before it faltered.

“One day they got the idea that they could mix the mascot idea and the screen idea together and make one big disaster. They started makin’ mascots. Nah, no. Growing mascots, in tanks like they were a couple’a sea monkeys.” Rambley furrowed his brows questioningly. “Ask your boy toy there. He’ll tell ya what they are.” Rambley looked slightly ruffled.

“Rambley was their golden boy, so he went first... Didn’t do so hot the first go, but hey. They called it day and moved onto makin’ the rest of ‘em. Each one got a little closer to the real deal. By time my number was called, I was lookin’ pretty close to what they really wanted. But they had to go through ‘bout

twenty birds to get there. The whole time, Rambley was callin' the shots. Slidin' his way in and rubbing elbows with the big wigs and whispering in their ears. Made him feel like a big guy, I guess. I bet he thought they loved him.

But they didn't. They just loved what he gave 'em- free work and a dancing bear. Well, 'til the floor dropped out. Rambley was the first to get a body and the first to have that body retired. Funny enough, it wasn't 'cause he scared the kids. It was 'cause he had this virus. We all did. The antiviral was holding it back, but it wasn't wiping it out- and it only worked when someone was there to inject it. Always cuttin' corners. It was time for replacements, so who else would they start with but good ol' Rambley the Raccoon? Show couldn't go on without the star.

There's just one problem. So, let's say Fuzzy here gets axed. Well, if his brain makes it out okay, or you get it plugged in in time, he gets uploaded to whatever you want and lives to tell the tale. Older bodies weren't made like that. Couldn't get them out.

Hell, mine's built the same way. I go caput and I'm gone for good- I just got the luxury of a slightly newer body that handles the chip better."

"So, is it the virus or the chip...?" Ed asked.

"It's both. Chip seems alright until the virus kicks in, then the body starts this long crusade killin' its own head. Real smart." Salem scoffed a little. "That don't matter. What matters is they couldn't get Rambley out of his old body and into the new one."

"...So... So, they had to use a backup..." Rambley finished. He looked down at his hands. "So... I'm a backup."

"Would've been great but they didn't have those neither. I'm tellin' ya, they were workin' with bear minimum."

Rambley blinked before looking up in confusion. "Wait, what do you-?"

“And Rambley was becomin’ a pain in their ass anyways. Maybe a new one wouldn’t ask so many questions. Bet that’s what they thought.”

“Wait, wait-.”

“And all’s they had to do was get a second one going and shove it in the new body. Problem solved.”

“Hold up, STOP! Hold the phone!” Rambley shouted. “What- What does THAT mean?! What are you saying?! That’s I’m some kind of Rambley clone?! That I’m not the same Rambley, is that what you’re saying?!”

“I’m sayin’ you weren’t the first,” Salem said, unphased by his shouting. “Yer codename’s literally like ‘Organic Rambley 2.0’ or somethin’ like that.”

R.org.2, Ed remembered. He had thought it was just Rambley’s new body. It wasn’t. It was an entirely new version of Rambley.

And that Rambley stared at Salem in open-mouthed horror. Devastated.

“That’s why, if I’d take a guess, you don’t remember the ‘good ol days’ back before you started up,” Salem added.

They didn’t sound vindicated or anything of the like. If anything, they just sounded tired.

But there was something else they weren’t saying.

That’s why all his memories of his friends were ripped straight off the cartoons. Why there was a big block of what he knew happened and what he remembered happening.

It made too much sense, but it couldn’t be true. That couldn’t be real, he knew who he was! He knew deep in his heart and soul that he was the real Rambley the Raccoon. There had to be a mistake!

“What...” Laura quietly spoke up after a prolonged silence. “What happened to the, uh... “Other” Rambley,” she said with air quotes.

“I think Indigo just wanted him gone. The company, not the man. Dunno much about him, but it doesn’t matter anymore. Instead’a puttin’ him down they moved him into the labs where they could watch him. And where he could still ‘help’ them run stuff down there. Lasted long enough to get this guy on his feet. Rambley found out, broke out, and things went south fast. But that’s a story for another time. I’m tired.”

“You should probably lay down,” Laura suggested.

“Yeah...” Salem turned and slid sideways until their head was leaning on her shoulder and then kicked a leg up on the table. “Down enough?”

“I meant something flatter than that,” Laura corrected. Salem continued sliding. “And I didn’t mean on me!”

“If ya don’t like it, move.”

“How am I supposed to move when you’re fwoomp! Right on top of me?”

“You’re wrong.”

Rambley’s voice cut through the room and right through Laura and Salem’s exchange. Just and sharp and bitter as his now narrowed gaze.

Salem looked entirely unsurprised by the accusation. They pulled themselves up enough to see him.

“Which part?” they asked dryly.

“The whole thing! I’M the real Rambley, not that... PSYCHO! There must have been a mix-up, a mistake- you don’t know what you’re talking about!” Rambley shouted.

“Rambley-.” Ed started.

“No, Ed! Don’t believe it!” he snapped back at him. “Remember all the times they’ve pulled something with us?! The train trick, the John trick, everything!” He tossed up his arms. “Who says this isn’t just another trick against ol’ Dumpster Face the Spotlight Stealer?! It makes no sense!”

Why was Ed looking at him like he was the one being unreasonable? Obviously, Salem cooked this whole thing up for some reason. They were probably just a compulsive liar! Or maybe they were in cahoots with his demented backup! Maybe they were scheming this whole thing; even the errand to get the antiviral could’ve been in on it!

He couldn’t remember anything Mollie had ever said that didn’t go back to an episode of the cartoon.

It was ridiculous! They were getting in his head just like that stupid fake other raccoon did- that monstrous thing, failed experiment. Resentful and angry because he moved on from his body.

“You’re just a copy. A fake,” it has said. It said it with so much conviction and authority. It used the screens just like he did. It controlled a body just like he did.

He swung back around and stared down Salem once more.

“That’s all it is, isn’t?! A big fat lie! You’re just lying because you hate me!” he yelled.

It boomeranged on him instantly, because he wondered, why did Salem hate him so much?

Why would Salem go so far to hurt him? Their friend?

Because he wasn’t their friend.

Because he wasn’t the real Rambley.

“Not Rambley!”

Not Rambley.

Not Rambley.

“I...! I don’t...?!” he fumbled over his words. The fire dissolved as he started to piece the parts together.

And all the while Salem hadn’t said a thing. They just watched with a look of exhaustion and... pity. Like they knew it all already. Like it wasn’t a trick or a ploy. No smirk, no cackle, just sympathy. Honest sympathy.

“Y’know those aren’t real, right?”

How many memories had he pieced together since the park closed?

How many of them did he still not remember?

Rambley desperately looked back to Ed for something, anything. For him to say they were wrong, to reveal that the weird other Rambley said something that contradicted all of this, revealing himself as the real fake.

But Ed didn't look shocked, he just looked worried.

And Ramsey's heart broke because he realized that Ed knew. He already figured it out.

And with that, so did Ramsey.

"I... I-I need a minute."

He clasped a hand over his face and turned, hastily rushing out of the room. Past Ed and past the counter, towards the kitchen door.

"Ramsey?" Ed asked worriedly as he passed.

"I need a minute," Ramsey choked.

He hurried into the kitchen and Ed stopped where he was, unsure whether to give him space or not. That was, until he heard the backdoor squeak.

"Hey, wait." Ed started to follow now, through the kitchen and stepping outside. "Ramsey?" There was

no reply. He walked around the diner and only then realized that Rambley had seemingly disappeared. “Rambley?!”

He ran out onto the path to look towards the bridge. It was dark, but he would’ve been able to see movement, but he didn’t.

“Rambley!”

Rambley was already gone.

Ed knew he had to go after him. It wasn’t safe for him to be alone after running into that other- into what they did today. Especially not when Rambley was upset, being alone was probably the last thing he needed.

He bolted back into the diner to tell Laura.

“Rambley ran off. I’m going to go find him.”

“What?! Oh no, poor guy...” Laura said sincerely.

“Maybe he went home? Here, take my light!”

Laura fished her small flashlight out of her purse and handed it to him.

“Does he still have your phone?”

“Uh... Yeah.” Ed wasn’t sure why he had to pat himself down to remember that, but he did.

“Good, then I’ll try calling him, and when you find him call me and tell me.”

“I will!” Ed called back as he ran out through the kitchen.

Laura could distantly hear him run off and only then slumped onto the booth’s table with a groan, her head in her hands.

“He’s probably just heading home. I HOPE he’s just going home,” Laura said worriedly. She pulled another napkin out of her purse, one covered in crumbs, and wrung it in her hands. “Maybe I should go help him look.”

“He oughta just let him go. He’ll be back he just needs to work somethin’ out,” Salem partially slurred.

“But what if the other Rambley tries to kill him?!”

“He won’t. Rambley hates him, but he’s still HIM and he’d rather have another one of him running around than Lloyd. He ain’t gonna chase him,” they explained. “...’Less he goes back there, in which case yeah, he’s a goner.”

“You’re really helping,” Laura said huffily.

“Hey, I’m the one dyin’ over here. He’s lucky, he’s clean.”

Well, that was a good thing. At least Rambley couldn’t get sick like this...

“...What about the other Rambley?”

“Ya mean ol’ Rabies Mouth? He’s never gonna die,” Salem mused with a wave of their hand. “He’s so deep in the system that it don’t matter how much that body falls apart, he’ll keep holding on.”

Salem didn’t say it like it was a warning, but Laura felt an uneasy settling in her stomach at the comment. She would have to remember to tell Ed that.

To warn him of that.

.

Ed made it back to Main Street and hadn’t seen even a glimpse of Rambley. Either he was very fast, or he hadn’t gone this way, and Ed could’ve believed either. Though he followed his gut feeling that Rambley headed back to the treehouse. That was really the only place he would’ve gone.

The entire time concern continued to eat at him.

What if Rambley got hurt?

What if he hurt himself?

He could. This was a huge thing for someone to learn about themselves. Rambley was probably scared and confused, and now he was all alone.

He should've done something at the diner, but he had just frozen up once Rambley started to have his meltdown. He didn't know what to do and then he didn't even stop Rambley from running out. He felt like an idiot. It wasn't the first time, and it likely wouldn't be the last.

He just kept making his way towards the treehouse. If he wasn't there, then he had no idea where he could be. At the theater? Probably not. At the café? Ed looked in as he passed and couldn't see him. Maybe at Mollie's Landing Pad. Probably hidden in a security office somewhere, in which case it might take him until morning to track him down.

He wouldn't have gone back to the labs.

...Would he?

The panic surged again. If Rambley went back to the labs to confront the Other Rambley for answers, then he could be in serious trouble. Could he have gone there? No. Maybe? He didn't know.

But now getting back to the treehouse was even more important, because if he wasn't there Ed was heading straight to the labs. The Other Rambley ominously invited him back anyways. Maybe he could bargain for Rambley's freedom if he was stuck in there- he was thinking too far ahead.

Get to the treehouse first, and he did.

He unceremoniously burst in through the unlocked door. It was unlocked so there was a chance Rambley was in here. But he wasn't sure if Rambley locked it when they last left since he did so internally.

"Rambley?!" he called. He walked through the living room, looked in the bathroom, and then drew the curtains back to his hidden bedroom. "Rambley!"

Nothing.

He walked to the trap door and lifted it up, leaning down to peek inside. It was pitch dark. He pulled back up and shut it back before hurrying into the kitchen and around to the front again, turning in place.

He wasn't here. That wasn't good.

He charged into the bedroom one more time and started looking through the bed before coming right back out. No, he wasn't in there.

Ed ran back out of the treehouse only to slow to a stop right outside. He just had a hunch, a feeling. Where else could he have gone? He had to be here.

Where did he go when he was scared?

Ed turned on his heel and strode across the living room and right back to the trap door. He lifted it up

and this time hopped down inside, crouched down, and clicked on Laura's flashlight.

And there was Rambley. Sitting in the dark beside his trainset, hands clamped over his mouth while his glassy eyes were overflowing with tears. Shaking like a leaf.

It physically hurt Ed to see him like that.

“Oh, Buddy.”

That's all it took to break the dam.

Rambley burst into sobs as he buried his face into his hands. He grabbed tightly, roughly at himself while his tail coiled around him, like it was trying to offer some form of comfort.

“Oh, Eddie!” he choked. “Oh Indigo, I should've known! Th-This is why there's s-so much wrong with me-e!”

Ed crawled over to him. “Rambley, no...”

“YES! I-I’m a coward! Hiding in my basement, playing with trains, wasting my time!” He choked and sobbed. “It’s because of THIS! I’m busted! I’m a f-failed copy!”

“Hey, hey, Buddy, no. You’re perfect how you are.”

Ed reached out for one of his hands. Despite how distraught he was, Rambley grabbed his hand like it was the last lifeline he had and squeezed tight.

“You couldn’t be any better.”

Rambley choked, audibly choked, and then dove in to hug Ed tightly. Burying his face into Ed’s shirt and weeping freely into it.

Ed reacted by holding him tight, patting his back and combing at his fluffed-up fur. Poor guy. His poor little buddy.

Still his buddy, no matter what.

That was the thing. This didn't change anything for Ed. This was still Rambley... there was just a second, insane and probably homicidal Rambley with a really scary body living in the park. One who could probably fool anyone who was none-the-wiser. Ed wouldn't fall for it twice, but that could be a real problem.

But that was the last thing he was thinking of now.

"Th-This means my friends..." Rambley gulped on his own tears. "They- They weren't e-eVER my friends! I never even knew them. I was al-ways alone..."

It was heartbreaking hearing him fall apart. He hugged Rambley tighter.

"You're not alone now. I'm here, Laura's here. And I bet they're still your friends. It's just different but they'll still love you," Ed assured.

"But I'm not Rambley..." Rambley said, his voice muffled.

“Yes, you are. This doesn’t change that.”

Rambley dared to pull back and look up at him again, but there was still so much hurt in his eyes.

“I-It’s not just that I’m not Rambley, Eddie. I’m not their Rambley either.”

“Good! He’s a jerk,” Ed blurted out.

In a better situation and Rambley might’ve cracked a smile. His mouth twitched like he was going to but then fizzled out just as quickly. He dropped his head, but Ed wasn’t going to let him hide so easily.

“Hey, come on. Listen to me.”

Ed cupped his tufted cheeks and lifted his head up to face him again. Rambley’s arms dropped limply at his sides as he reluctantly lifted his gaze.

“Who cares who’s first? And who cares who’s the ‘real’ Rambley? There is no REAL Rambley! He was

just a cartoon character, and you're not him because you're a real person. Not a cartoon. You're REAL." He rubbed his thumbs against his cheeks gently. "There's no way you can be realer than that."

"Mm-hmm," Rambley said noncommittally.

"You're very fluffy too."

"Thank you..."

There, he got it. The slightest hint of a smile. It was a huge relief even if it didn't stick around long.

"You're great," he said.

"Yeah, I know..." Rambley looked down, eyes lidded sadly, as he reached up to rest his hands on Ed's. The tears briefly bubbled back up and he blinked them back. "But I don't feel like it."

Ed understood. He didn't thrust anymore reassurances on him, he just silently held him.

Rambley sighed shakily. "But what do I know? You've a-always been smarter than me..." he mumbled. He pulled Ed's hands down, holding one as he used his own to wipe the tears off his face. "...What do we do now?"

Ed knew what he wanted to do, but...

...No. Screw it. He was going to do it.

"...Get your stuff. Some stuff, whatever you think you'll need. You're coming home with me."

Rambley looked up with a start. "What?"

Ed just nodded, as though that clarified anything.

"I... I can't leave..." Rambley said unsurely, confused, hesitant. "This is my home. I might not be- I might be different, but I can't just... give up on the park? Run away?"

"Not for forever. I meant just for a couple of days. Just a break. You're going to need it." Ed squeezed

his hand. "Let me take you home. Please," he pleaded.

Rambley's eyes widened as he stared at Ed, silently processing the request.

He processed the request for a very long time.

And then without a word, he nodded.

"Okay," Ed said with a smile. "Let's get started. Do you need anything from down here?"

"N-No. I don't think so..." Rambley said unsurely. He looked around at the flashlight illuminated basement. "...It will be okay while I'm gone?"

"It sure will."

Rambley wasn't sure, but he trusted Ed. He let him lead him out of the basement and he began to try and think of what he'd need to take, even when it hadn't totally sunk in.

“Can I have my phone back to call Laura?” Ed asked.

“Oh, sure. Sorry. I, uh... It’s over here.” Rambley shuffled to his bedroom and grabbed his bag, which he had just tossed amongst the stuff. Ed hadn’t even noticed it. He dug the phone out and handed it over. “Here you go, Buddy.”

“Thanks.”

Ed quickly called Laura while Rambley wandered around his house, somewhat distantly, looking around and trying to figure out what to take.

“Hey, I’m here!” she greeted quickly. “Rambley?”

“No, it’s me. I found him. He’s okay.”

Well, maybe not okay, but... he found him.

“That’s great! I’m so glad. You tell him I was worried, but don’t make him feel bad about it. You know

what? Actually, don't. Just tell him I'm glad he's okay. I don't want to stress him out."

"Will do. Soo... He's going to get some of his things and stay over at my apartment tonight. Maybe for a couple of days. We'll see."

"You're taking Rambley home with you?"

"Yeah."

"Oh my God, FINALLY! I've been telling you to do that since day one!"

He hoped Rambley didn't hear that. He probably didn't, he was so distracted right now-

He looked over to see Rambley looking at him with brows furrowed in confusion.

He tried not to look away too quickly.

“Heh, yeah. I’m going to help him get his stuff together and take it to the car and then we’ll come get you?”

“Are you kidding? I’ve got a skunk here who needs round-the-clock monitoring until at LEAST morning.”

“Wait, you’re staying? Do you want us to stay behind?”

“I don’t remember invitin’ you to stay,” he could hear Salem say in the background. They sounded bemused and even more groggy.

“I’m just going to pull an all-nighter! I do it all the time!” Laura brushed off. “Just come pick me up whenever you get up. But DON’T sleep in. If I stay up too long, I’ll totally throw the whole schedule off.”

“The all-nighters don’t do that?” Ed asked teasingly.

“It’s my life, Mom!” Laura jokingly wailed. “But yeah, come get me tomorrow.”

“I will, I promise. I’ll call you back later.”

“Good! Talk to you later! And be careful with him, don’t let anyone see him. Okay, bye!”

He could tell Laura wanted to stay in the loop. Any other situation and she would’ve probably invited herself to stay overnight and crashed on his floor on that weird palette thing her mom bought her when she moved out. But he wasn’t shocked she was staying behind. She took her job seriously and, honestly, someone needed to stay behind with Salem. He would really have to thank her later for that.

In the meantime, Rambley started to finally get to work. With his bag in hand, he began to pack light. His spare bandana, his green suit- would he even need it? Did he need to take a blanket? Pillows? His toothbrush? Yes to that, but what about soap? Could he use Ed’s soap? What if he had a weird allergic reaction and all his fur fell out? No, that was silly.

...Definitely the toothbrush. He grabbed one of his many, many Mollie plushies for good measure to-

Oh, Mollie!

He raced to the couch and hastily grabbed the hidden CD out from under the pillow.

“Sorry, Moll! I didn’t mean to leave you up here!” he apologized profusely. He opened his bag and carefully tucked her inside, between the softer bits. “There we go. Right where you’ll be safe!”

He knew she couldn’t hear him, but it was still nice to pretend. Even if she didn’t even know who he was. He swallowed thickly and hastened into the bathroom to get what he needed out of there, then came back out.

“Do you want me to grab your rations?” Ed offered.

“Yes please... Actually, no. I think I’ll be okay without them. It’s probably best we don’t try to lug that heavy bag around.”

He couldn't risk taking the rations out into the elements. He would just have to live off the leftovers Ed brought back from his parents' house. He could do that. He could do this.

"Okay!" He inhaled deeply and exhaled fast and looked to Ed with determination. "Let's go."

"Let's go," Ed agreed. "And if you forgot anything we can just drive back."

"Right!"

Rambley had the biggest smile he had gotten since they left the labs, and it was totally fake.

It gave Ed some momentary doubts about whether he was doing the right thing even suggesting this, but he quickly doubled down. He needed to take Rambley home. If not so that he could get a break, then to show him that he had somewhere else to go. Just to give him a place to run away to.

And Rambley was ready to run.

They headed outside. Rambley expected some sort of wave of panic from leaving his house, but there was nothing. Just a quiet, chilly evening. Ed shut the door, Rambley locked it, and they set off.

And before they knew it, they made it to the front gate.

And that was when it sunk in. When the doors opened and he was truly facing the exit of the park, only then did it finally sink in that he was leaving.

He was really going to leave Indigo Park, his home. The only thing he had ever known.

What if his chip detonated? What if someone saw him? What if they got in a car accident? If he caught something deadly? What if Mollie's disc got broken? Or stolen? Or something happened to the park while he was gone? A fire? A break-in? A major catastrophic failure that destroyed the whole system

because nobody was there to decline a suspicious update?

Anything could happen once he left the park. Every wall of protection he had would be totally gone, and his power in the park didn't translate to the outside world. No cameras to check, no alarms to activate; he would be all on his own. Helpless if something went wrong. Defenseless if something went really wrong.

It was such a giant unnecessary risk! Not to mention against so many protocols that he couldn't even count all the violations!

...But.

But.

There was a teeny tiny part of him that was excited to go. That wanted to see Ed's apartment and the big, wide world outside the walls of the park.

He didn't want to sit in his basement feeling miserable about himself. Since he started getting ready to leave, he had barely thought about it, too wrapped up in the anxiety and anticipation of leaving his home.

He could do this, maybe?

He could do this. Maybe.

Ed noticed his hesitance. He wondered if he had pushed too hard and the doubts returned.

"We don't have to go," he gently reminded. He was giving him one last out.

"I don't have to go," Rambley repeated.

He inhaled deeply.

"But I want to."

And then he stepped outside of the gate. Rambley had come face to face with plenty of places where

he didn't want to go. Places that despite being in the Kingdom of Fun and Freedom made even him sweat a little. Such as the labs; it had taken all his willpower to step into that eerie stairwell to follow Ed down. Then there were those dark, spooky tunnels that he had to sneak through to find the supply cache, ugh.

But never had he faced something as daunting as Ed's car.

Looking at that car and knowing he had to climb in and drive out was like walking into both of those places combined. It was giving him flashbacks to the first time he left his house after his first torpor, slowly peeking out into the park with the dread and fear that it might've changed while he was hunkered down in hiding. It was different, but gosh was it all so overwhelming.

That didn't mean he was going to turn back though. He swallowed tightly and continued the seemingly endless walk towards that car. Jumping with a start when Ed pressed the button to unlock it.

“Since it’s so late I think it’s fine if you want to sit in the front. You can just pull my jacket over your head if we pass anyone.”

“Finally, my short stature comes in handy for once!”
Rambley proudly stated.

He threw any caution to the wind and opened the car door before climbing inside and shutting it behind him, closing it so fast that he nearly caught his tail. He instantly noticed a strong, pleasant smell in the car.

“It smells delicious in here,” he complimented.

“Oh yeah, the food! Do you want something before we go? The sweet potato casserole has a fork in it.”

Ed pointed towards the back seat and Rambley looked back. There was a plethora of Tupperware boxes filled with leftovers. One was open and, sure enough, had a plastic fork sticking into it. Almost like someone had stolen a few bites during the drive.

“...Eddie, have those been back there this whole time?”

“Yup.”

“And has that one been OPEN the whole time?”

“...Yup.”

Rambley tsked. “Rookie mistake, Royal Rangler. Uncovered food has a higher risk of contamination. You should really throw them out just to be safe...” He then leaned through the seats, reaching out and snatching up the container up. “But I AM a raccoon, so I can take it off your hands!”

Ed chuckled and pushed his tail aside so he could get in.

“Go nuts.”

“Oh no, I’m waiting until we get there,” Rambley said. Sliding back into his seat while popping the lid

on, holding the fork in his other hand. “It’s not exactly sanitary eating straight out of the container either, but I’ll let it slide. Odds are if you’re carrying any germs, I’ve already acquired them through close contact.”

“Pretty much. Wouldn’t be the first time you caught something from me... Wait, actually, when we get there, I’ve got to take a shower. I don’t know what I was crawling through down there in those labs, but it really didn’t smell right.”

Rambley gawked at him. “Crawled through? You know, you could have told me that before I had my face in your shirt.”

“Didn’t you smell it?”

“Yes, but I assumed it was just from that freak grabbing you! Eww...” He stuck out his tongue and set the Tupperware down beside his bag, which he shoved into the floorboard. “Now we’re both going to get dysentery.”

Ed tossed his jacket over him as a response. Rambley simply pulled it back, leaving it on his head but wearing it almost like a cloak. Just in case he had to hide himself.

“Thank you!” he chirped.

“No problem! Alright, let’s lock in. Do you know how to put on a seatbelt?”

Rambley gave him an incredulous look. Did he really think-?

He got a mischievous glint to his eyes, then smiled at Ed.

“Of course I do! Let’s see...”

He pulled out the seatbelt far and stared at it, humming and furrowing his brow. He started to pull it around him but then poked his head through so one strap was behind him. He made a few loose swipes with the buckle before pulling it off.

“No, no. That’s not right.”

He rubbed his chin and hummed harder. He then twisted it around and tried to loop it around him, one leg over it.

At first Ed was a little concerned, but by time he started pretzeling himself into it, he figured out that Rambley was just messing with him... Right?

“I just can’t figure this thingie out! You would think having to manage all the gizmos and straps and safety harnesses in the park that I’d be able to figure this one out but I’m totally stumped. Silly Rambley!”

Definitely messing with him.

“Pfft, okay. I’ve got it.”

Rambley was barely hiding his smile.

“Oh, no. I’m sure I can figure it out! After all, I am a super smart comp-!”

Rambley's mouth clamped shut when Ed reached out and took the seatbelt and gently unwound it. He was working quickly but it felt like each touch was lasting a lot longer than it really was. He pulled the seatbelt around him, aligned it how it was supposed to be, and clicked the buckle into place.

"There we go! Locked in."

Rambley had a funny smile. "Mm... Mmhmhm!"

"What?" Ed asked, thinking he was laughing at his little joke.

"Oh, nothing. Thank you!"

"No big deal."

"It most certainly was."

Rambley continued to smile to himself with his hands clasped tightly in his lap. Feeling all fuzzy at the moderately gentlemanly gesture.

Oh, that couldn't happen again. If he got weird like that, he'd make Ed uncomfortable.

But thankfully Ed didn't seem to notice. Instead buckling himself in and getting the car started. He even put on some soft jazzy coffeeshop-like music and the heater on low, getting everything as comfortable as possible in preparation for the drive.

Then once everything was ready, he looked to Rambley. He had an anxious but excited little smile. His ears tilted just enough to show his trepidation.

"Last chance to back out," Ed offered.

Rambley considered it. Ed held his breath.

"...No. No! I want to go."

Ed was practically beaming. "Then here we go!"

He turned around to back out. The car promptly jolted forward, causing him to spin around and Rambley to grab the door handle in alert.

“...Might help if I put it in reverse first.”

“Gee, Eddie. Should I drive?”

“Can you reach the pedals?”

“As a matter of fact, smart guy, yes I can. I just won’t be able to see over the dashboard if I do,” Rambley said matter-of-factly.

“Sorry.”

“I’ll let it slide this time. Now let’s get this show on the road!”

“You’re the boss. Here we go!”

Ed backed out until he could turn around and began to drive down the overgrown road.

Rambley’s heart started to race immediately as he watched the park disappear behind the trees. They soon drove past the old Rangler gateway, and he

looked back to see it disappear and was shocked at how faded it looked. Maybe it was just because it was dark. Yes, that had to be it... but the overgrown path was very real. The trees standing tightly together like towering fence posts.

It suddenly dawned on him how many walls of protection he was shedding by leaving the park. His home, the park walls, the barricade of trees. Layers upon layers protecting him from the outside world. Keeping out intruders who would hurt him.

...And keeping him trapped in the process.

They passed a fence covered in caution tape and signs saying 'Private Property' and 'Do Not Enter'.

And 'This is not a park entrance.'

Guess that solidified that they weren't coming back.

He squirmed uneasily in his seat.

“Sooo, how long does it take to get to your home again?” he asked.

“About half an hour, but it goes a lot quicker once we get on the main road.”

“Gosh, I guess I never considered how far you drive to get here...”

“Hey, it’s great! Gets me out from behind the computer and gives me some time to, you know, decompress and think. It’s a nice drive too. We’re not going to see much of it at night, but there’s a lot of trees.”

More trees. Good. Trees meant safety. Or maybe that was just some sort of instinctual raccoon thing built into his body.

There was a lot of weird stuff built into his body, apparently. Stuff that probably wasn’t even supposed to be there.

And thinking of that reminded Rambley of the incident back in the basement. One the way here he was too upset to think, but now that he calmed down the embarrassment crept up.

He couldn't believe he let Ed see him cry. And not just cry a little. Not a happy cry during a sentimental moment or getting teary eyed at a sad movie. Oh no, that was downright bawling. Hysterical. He didn't even cry like that when he was alone.

He wrung his hands in his lap. Twiddling his thumbs and keeping his eyes down.

"I'm sorry you had to see that earlier..." he murmured.

"How was it your fault? If he would've let me go, I wouldn't have had to see him at all! He actually moved the antiviral down into the observation office that looked into where his cage was."

"No, I don't mean that. I was talking about- he WHAT?!" Rambley gawked at Ed for a long second.

Ed nodded. Rambley's eyes darted to the side thoughtfully, then he dared to ask, "...What did it look like?"

"Big." Ed briefly pulled a hand off the wheel to emphasize. "It took up most of the room, and it was full of a bunch of stuff. Like... backpacks."

"Backpacks? Empty ones?"

"I don't think so."

Rambley stared before forcing a nervous chuckle.

"That's a little ominous..." He cleared his throat. "But we're getting off-track. I didn't mean him, I meant seeing me... you know, getting upset. I didn't want to put you in that position."

At first, Ed didn't know what to say to that. It wasn't hard to tell that Rambley was self-conscious. He had been apologizing so much and no amount of 'it's okay, don't be' really clicked. He considered his words, then.

“I’m sorry you were alone until I got there.”

Rambley dared to look up at him. His glassy eyes nearly shining in the low glow from the headlights. Filled with a life that he hadn’t seen in the other Rambley, with hope and appreciation.

And to think he thought he wasn’t real. He was better than the original.

Ed smiled at him.

Then he swerved back into his lane. Rambley cracked a smile.

The ride dragged further along. Time ticked by. Music changed. Rambley watched the trees pass, and then the occasional light. He tried to look up and see if there were stars, but clouds must’ve rolled in as there wasn’t a single one in the sky. He looked to the road again and noticed more lights in the distance.

They passed their first car around then. “Head’s up, head’s up,” Ed warned and Rambley ducked his head down in response. He went totally unnoticed- but of course, the car was two lanes away.

But once they got to the city it was a little more difficult to stay hidden. There weren’t that many cars out but the walls of buildings instead of trees didn’t bode well. That being said, the city was on the smaller side.

Rambley was torn between hiding away and peeking out the windows at the passing sights.

“We’re almost there,” Ed said. He sounded excited.

Rambley tried to match the energy. “Good! Can’t wait!

He didn’t have to wait much longer. Shortly after that they turned into a treelined parking lot that led up to a wide, grey, three-story tall building. It was clearly an apartment complex, with there being visible stairs

in an alcove at the front, barely hidden by a tree that had lost its leaves.

Ed pulled up and parked only a few parking spaces away from the stairs. He looked around to make sure nobody else was outside.

“Okay, so here’s our options. We run in really fast, I go in and get a blanket, or I carry you in and we pretend you’re a big stuffed animal,” Ed listed off on his fingers.

“Hmm, I am certainly cute enough,” Rambley lightly teased. “...But... Nobody’s out, so maybe... Maybe we could make a run for it? The stairs look closed in so I should be shielded. What floor are you on?”

“Two. See that door right there? That’s mine.” He pointed it out.

“That’s not very far at all! You know what? I think I can make it.”

Rambley's hands were already shaking as he unbuckled his seatbelt. He shook one out as he stealthily looked around to make sure nobody was coming.

"I don't suppose you have security cameras around here?"

"Not that I know about."

"Good! Then let's get in there! No roommates?"

"You?"

"Perfect! I didn't think so."

Rambley felt antsy, and the best way to beat that was to do something. So, he pulled the jacket sleeves on while keeping it over his head and tried to stuff his tail under it- which fit, but succeeded in making him look like a lump with legs sticking out of the bottom. He then gathered up his back and the sweet potato container.

“Wait, stay there and let me get the food,” Ed said. He quickly hopped out of the car and ran around to stack up Tupperware containers in his arms. Then he looked around one last time and cracked open the passenger door. “Coast is clear.”

Rambley ducked out and between the cars, letting Ed shut the door behind him before following him. Both running to and up the stairs, and then Rambley huddling in the stairwell as Ed got his door open. Then they darted inside Ed’s apartment and shut the door behind them.

Ed took a sharp left into the kitchen and put the food containers on the counter.

“Let me give you the tour! So, this is the kitchen and that’s the living room,” Ed explained, leading him along. Rambley followed closely, sliding off Ed’s jacket and carrying it with him.

So, upon entering the apartment door they were faced with a closed double-doored pantry.

To the left was a small but modern kitchen. Grey stainless-steel refrigerator, black stove, double sink- it even looked like there was a dishwasher. Most of the counterspace was clean, save one corner in the back that was topped with boxes of cereal, cookies, and popcorn. Rambley also spotted an obscene amount of rolled up chip bags on top of the fridge, and a bunch of fridge magnets sticking menus and stuff to the fridge.

Ed squeezed past and led him into the living room, which was directly to the right of the front door. It was a rectangular room with a comfy grey couch sitting on the wall for the pantry. There was a short coffee table in front of it and a small side table on the opposite side of the couch with a lamp on it. There were also two chairs on either side. One was greyish and round, and the other was brown, antique, and worn- looking like something that the late Isaac Indigo would've had in his office.

Across from the couch was a flat screen TV mounted on the wall. It was on the smaller side but to Rambley, who was used to his tiny TV, it was a big

upgrade. There was an antique-looking secondhand cabinet underneath it with a couple of video game systems on top of it.

Both the kitchen and the living room had windows that pointed outside towards the walkway, but the blinds were drawn so nobody could see through either way.

Rambley could feel eyes staring though. It made his heart thrum a little faster.

On the other side of the couch, on the same wall as the doorway they came in but on the opposite side of the room, was another doorway leading into a short hallway. Immediately to the right was another door that Ed pushed open and pointed inside.

“Here’s my bedroom.”

Ed’s bedroom was a little smaller than Rambley expected, with the large double bed taking up most of the room. Its headboard against the right wall and the closet in front of them against the left. The bed

had a puffy navy green comforter on it and a couple of mismatch-colored pillows. There was an overflowing hamper in the corner and a couple of framed posters hanging over the bed.

“Are those posters from movies or games?”

“Games. That one with the doll on it I got as a reward for jumpstarting a game called Molly Coddled.”

“I think I prefer my Mollie, thank you very much. That thing’s super creepy!”

“She’s even creepier when you’re playing it. And that one I bought, that’s for Loneshot 2. It’s sort of a western themed game. And this one I got from a friend of mine who went to a convention. It’s for Asylumland and it’s actually signed by one of the developers, but you can’t see it because it’s under the frame. See this little black squiggle?”

“Is that an L?”

“I think so.”

Maybe he could watch Eddie play all those games. That would be fun! Even the really creepy doll one.

Was- Was he going to sleep in here, or on the couch? Gosh, he felt too... excited to sleep! Maybe he'd just pull an all-nighter and then take a little nap tomorrow. That way he'd be up to drive back to the park with Ed. That sounded like a good plan.

On the other side of the hallway was a pair of open pantry-like doors, except there was a washer and dryer inside and some junk stashed in the shelves above it.

“That’s the bathroom,” Ed said, pointing to the open door at the end. Rambley caught a glimpse of the bathroom. “And this is my office, where I do all my streaming.”

The door was on the wall just past his bedroom’s and led into a second bedroom that had been repurposed into an office. Maybe it was the lack of a

bed, but it seemed to be bigger than the bedroom, with the walls painted a low yellow and partially covered in soundproofing foam- either he ran out or hadn't gotten around to finishing.

The other walls were put to good use though. For one, Ed had something that looked like an imagination board with posters from Indigo Park on it, a map, and plenty of sticky notes with little labels on them. There was even a newspaper article pinned front and center about the park's closure.

Come to think of it, it was less an imagination board and more a conspiracy board. Something a would-be detective would have shoved in the corner of their office as they investigated a missing diamond instead of a closed theme park.

Ed stared at the board in silent realization before stepping to the side, poorly blocking it, and gestured towards his desk.

“Here's where the magic happens!”

Rambley gave him a knowing grin before directing his attention to the desk.

The desk was set up with three computer monitors.

“Why do you have three computer screens?”

“For streaming. I use the two on the right for the gaming part and making that work, and the one on the left is for chat and Harmony.”

“Neat! You’ll have to show me how it works.”

“That I can do.”

The monitor wasn’t the only thing on the desk. There was other miscellaneous stuff. CDs, a notebook, and empty and crushed can of soda. Another rolled up bag of chips.

There was a laundry basket filled with all the plushies he had gotten from the park in the corner. Well, except for two. Ed had a Rambley and a Lloyd-Lloyd? -propped up on his desk, with a Rambley

action figure unboxed and propped on the desk in front of them.

Well, this sealed it. Ed was a HUGE Indigo Park fan. Rambley was very flattered. If not for how odd he felt, he would've been gushing over everything.

And not only that, but he had a camera mounted on a tripod AND a green screen sitting in front of the closet doors, despite the fact that Ed didn't use a facial camera. Maybe he was considering it? Maybe he used to? Rambley made a mental note to ask about that later.

Gosh, so much park stuff though. A little touch of home even though they were miles away.

At least thirty minutes, two fences, and a bunch of trees away.

And miles of being completely visible in between.

Very stuffy in there, actually. Rambley tugged at his bandana to try and loosen it. It was so tight that he

could barely swallow. He grimaced a little. He had only been wearing the thing for most of his life, you'd think he'd learn how to tie it comfortably.

What was he thinking about? Oh, the park stuff. Right. Whenever he got homesick, he could just look at Ed's board. But he was only going to be here for a few days. Only a few days. Hours really.

"So, what do you think?" Ed asked.

He had been too quiet, hadn't he? He had to make up for that before Ed thought something was wrong.

"It's great! I didn't think it would be this big, and this office is just incredible! You know, I don't blame you for setting aside the bigger room for work. You've got all this space- and don't think I didn't notice that green screen! You should go for it, Buddy! You've got the face for it, just like yours truly. I can even give you some pointers, not that you need any. It's really not so different from talking without a camera if you think about it, and hey, you just need a green screen not a whole spandex suit! Not that you

couldn't handle one with that washer and dryer hookup- y'know, actually, I don't know if those are washer dryer safe- I guess I should've brought some of my laundry and tried it out, heh! But I think your home is fantastic! It's really- it's very- it's you! And I mean that in a good way!"

Rambley was talking faster and faster. A stream of thoughts pouring out of his mouth without any filter. But there was a good reason why.

Because he really liked the apartment! He could definitely see himself staying over here now and then! One night or two. Maybe. Tonight at least.

It was cool! It was cozy! It was nicely furnished! It was...

It was too much.

Rambley felt something weird creeping over him. That feeling like when he first left the park and thought his chip was messing up. It couldn't be that

though. If it was, he would've felt it in the car. No blackouts, no headaches, no confusion, nothing.

Just this overwhelming feeling like something was very, very wrong.

“But- uh... I guess I'm getting ahead of myself. Heh. Sorry about that! Just got a little... excited.”

It wasn't excitement, he realized. This twitchy feeling was a different kind of wind-up entirely. He fanned his face with his hand and tugged at his bandana again.

“Got that heater turned up, eh? I don't blame you,” he said with a shaky smile.

Ed had definitely noticed something was up. If it wasn't the general twitchiness, it was how hot he seemed in a house where the thermostat was only barely turned up- and that was its max.

“Rambley, you’re breathing really hard. Do you want to sit down?” he offered, grabbing and pulling his office chair over.

“I’m fine! Heh, I’m just... uh...” Rambley faded off.

“Do you want to go sit in the car?”

“NO! No, no! I’m okay! I don’t need to go back to the park,” Rambley blurted out. He gave a strained chuckle. “Heheh... Bu-But now that you mention it. How about we, um... Go sit on the couch? Do you mind?”

“Sure!”

Rambley turned on his heel and hastily speedwalked to the couch. His fur was sticking up on end and he felt so weird. He almost felt like he was going to be sick, but somehow also not sick at the same time. Maybe his racing heart was bumping into his stomach.

He tossed the jacket over the arm of the couch as he sat down. At least it was as soft as it looked. His fingers dug easily into the suede material.

“Want some water or juice? I’ve got some soda that tastes exactly like Bird Up.”

Rambley would’ve normally scoffed at the notion that any soda could compete with Mollie’s own, but he wasn’t feeling up to it. Water might help. He hadn’t had juice in a while. Wait!

“Actually! How about- do you by any chance have a sheet? Any color sheet, just a sheet.”

“Sure. One second.”

Ed headed around the corner and into the laundry cubby.

Meanwhile, Rambley looked around for something to focus on, but things were just all blurred together. It smelled like Ed. Everything smelled like Ed and that

should've been comforting, but also terribly displacing.

Thankfully, it didn't take Ed long to come back with a sheet. A white one, too. Just like the ones he had back at his house, and he had a hunch that maybe that would help this.

"Thank you, Eddie!" Rambley said, all but snatching the sheet from his hands.

"No... problem?"

Ed watched as Rambley wound himself up in the sheet and within seconds was entirely cocooned in it. Totally hidden underneath the thin, white sheet, but clearly not because he was cold.

There was a change instantly. Not a big one, but closing out everything and indulging in the safety of a hiding space eased whatever instinct went haywire when Rambley walked out of the park.

He still wasn't at home. He was miles away. Unsafe. Out where anyone could see him. No doors to lock people out. No cameras to look through. Just him, stuck out here, exposed.

But the sheet helped a little. At least with the sheet he could bundle up and it would be just like curling up in his bed. He could pretend he was back at home. He had gotten good at pretending.

He heard Ed stepping past him and felt him sitting on the couch beside him. That was assuring too. Ed was right there. He wasn't alone. He could do this. If he could stop going insane for five seconds. He could do this.

"Are you alright?"

"Just making myself at home!"

"Maybe got a little overwhelmed?" Ed offered.

"...Yeah, maybe a little..." Rambley mumbled. "But I'm-I'm okay, Eddie. I just haven't ever left the park

before. I didn't think it would be so... much. It's just too much all at once."

"That makes sense. We might've pushed it a little. I can take you home if you need me to."

"No, I don't want to go home. Thank you though."

Yes, he did. NO, he didn't.

"I just need to get this thing under control is all. Maybe I'm just recalibrating for a new location. That's all! I'll be fine! A-And if I ever get homesick, I'll go look at your conspiracy board."

Ed cringed inwardly a little. Too late to hide it in the closet, cross his fingers, and hope Rambley didn't see it.

There had to be something more he could do though. Wait, maybe it was time to break out the big guns. Or gun.

“Want to play a game of Connect Four?” Ed he offered with a smile.

He could see Rambley’s ears perk up underneath the sheet.

“YES! Yes, that would perfect! We could-... Oh wait, I didn’t bring it. I forgot.”

Ed got up. “Wait right here.”

“No, no, no! I’m not having you drive all the way back to the park just for Connect Four!” Rambley said. He tried to reach out for him but was too wrapped up and only succeeded in falling over.

Ed suppressed his snicker and gave him a little pat on the... head? Back? Somewhere.

“I’m not. I’ll be right back.”

He walked over and grabbed a plastic back that was sitting beside the game cabinet and carried it back.

He pulled a box out of it and set it on the coffee table.

“Ta-da!”

Rambley finally got himself untangled enough to peek out and his mouth nearly dropped open.

There it was, a shiny box for Connect Four.

“Whoa, whoa, you didn’t tell me you had Connect Four!” Rambley briefly pushed aside his discomfort to snatch up the box. It was different than his own, a newer copy for sure. “Is this a new one? IT IS! Still taped closed and everything!” He hugged it to himself with a beaming smile. “This is great! Now we can... play all... huh.”

Rambley’s brows furrowed questioningly.

“What?” Ed asked.

“Eddie... Were you planning on me coming to stay with you?”

Why else would he have bought a brand-new Connect Four when his was in perfectly fine condition?

“Well...” Ed rubbed at his shoulder. “...Yeah.”

“Since this whole lab thing? Since the first time we went there?”

“No, I’ve been planning on it for a while. I bought that a couple of weeks ago.”

Rambley’s eyes widened as though he figured something out on his own, then his smile returned. His eyes were filled with appreciation, his ruffled fur making him look equally tired and touchable.

“Thank you, Ed. For this. I needed this.”

Ed smiled back. “No problem.”

Maybe Rambley had a point about it burning up in here...

“Well!” Rambley peeled back the tape and easily got the box open. He pulled out the plastic wrapped frame pieces and waggled them. “Shall we?”

“Sure! But don’t go easy on me just because it’s my place.”

“Oh ho, Eddie, I won’t.”

Rambley was still shaky and strange as he set up Connect Four. He felt wrong in so many ways, and yet still he was starting to feel a little more like himself.

Of the first three games, Rambley only lost the first one, and he took it like a champ. Wanted to play again immediately and proved himself as soon as he did. And with every game he seemed more comfortable, letting the sheet slide down his shoulders but keeping it bunched up around him.

“Want me to put on the TV?” Ed eventually asked.

“Sure!” Rambley chirped.

“What do you want to watch? I’ve got everything that we got on the phone here.”

“Put it on the weather channel.”

“The weather channel...?”

“Yup! I hear it’s very soothing. And it’s something I can’t get back at the park!”

DID he have a weather channel? He checked through and, low and behold, a weather channel. He put it on, and they were met with jazzy music and a layout of the week’s weather. Huh, it was kind of soothing.

“Ooo, looks like it’s going to get cold soon. We might get snow!”

Rambley was trying very, very hard to be normal. Ed couldn’t tell, and they went back to their game. The jazzy music switching to voices as the newscasters

started discussing a minor flood further south. It just became a comfortable background noise.

Rambley stopped clutching the sheet around him. Though that could've been because he needed both hands for the game. One to drop pieces in, and the other to rub his chin like he was pondering battle plans.

“I’ve got a confession, Eddie,” he eventually confessed between games. “I had you put it on the Weather Channel because I didn’t know what else to put it on and I didn’t want you to know that.”

“Yeah, I kind of had a feeling.”

“You don’t think I’m weird, do you?” Rambley asked a little worriedly.

“No, it’s not weird. It’s just a little awkward.”

Maybe not the best way to word that if the raccoon’s look was any indication.

Rambley sputtered. “What- What’s the difference?!”

“Weird’s off-putting and awkward can be cute,” Ed quickly added.

Rambley squinted suspiciously.

“Okay, now you’re just buttering me up.”

Ed shot him a grin. “You are kind of like a fluffy little dinner roll.”

Rambley stared at him, mouth agape.

“...That was awkward,” he said.

“But it made you blush.”

“Wha- No it didn’t! What makes you think that?” He patted his cheek as though checking the temperature. “You can’t see anything.”

“I don’t have to see it, I can tell when you get ruffled.”

“I don’t get ruffled.” Rambley combed back his head fur with one hand and smoothed down his tail with the other and then adjusted his bandana bow with both. “See? Cool as a cucumber.”

“Uh huh. Speaking of, want something to eat?”

“I thought you’d never ask! Pass me those sweet potatoes, please?”

“They’re all yours,” Ed promised. He headed into the kitchen, stared at the food containers still on the counter, and then quietly moved them into the fridge, except the sweet potatoes. “Want me to warm them up?”

“Oh, I think they’re plenty warm from sitting out,” Rambley called back.

Well, at least he felt good enough to get snarky.

Needless to say, the sweet potatoes went over very well, with Rambley complimenting them plenty of

times and offering them back. But Ed had his fill at dinner, he stuck with a leftover biscuit just so Rambley didn't have to eat alone.

He wasn't sure if it was the biscuit, the weather channel, or the day he had but Ed was starting to lose steam pretty quickly. He hid his first yawn, but Rambley caught the second, and he called him out on the third.

"You've had a long day, Eddie. How about we call it a night?"

"That'd be great," Ed admitted.

He stretched his back, starting to feel the soreness creeping in after all that went down in the basement. It was easy to forget that it had happened today with all that went on after it.

"But I've got to go hose off first," he said. "Hey, how about you sleep in my bed tonight?"

Rambley's eyes popped open.

“Not in a weird way. I just thought-.”

“That sounds GREAT! Just as long as you don’t mind,” Rambley chirped.

“I don’t mind,” Ed echoed.

“Then it’s a plan! Lemme just move my stuff in there.”

Rambley hopped up from the couch and messily folded up the sheet before slinging it over his shoulder, grabbing his bag, and then heading towards the bedroom.

He didn’t want to seem too eager, but that bed looked awfully soft! And maybe he could sneak and take down a poster or two and use the nails to hang up the sheet. Ed wouldn’t mind, surely. Ed was happy to have him here. Happy enough to suggest sharing his own bed- sure, Rambley did the same, but this was very different!

He plopped the sheet down on the foot of the bed and looked for a place to put his bag before hanging it on the bed frame. Ed came in and crouched down, reaching underneath the bed.

“What’cha looking for?” Rambley asked.

“Just getting a spare blanket. I’m going to have to take one of the pillows too, but I’ll let you have dibs.”

Take one of the- he wasn’t sleeping in-

“Oh. OH! Oh, I thought- umm... Never mind! Hehe.”
Rambley looked a little embarrassed.

That made a lot more sense, really. He wasn’t sure why he assumed anything else.

“But I don’t want to drive you out of your bed!”

“You’re not! I sleep on the couch all the time. Almost as much as I sleep at my desk.”

“You shouldn’t be doing that! That’s terrible for the neck.”

Ed lifted his head just to pointedly quirk a brow at him.

“...Just because I do it doesn’t mean you should,” Rambley corrected.

“Do as I say, not as I do?” Ed challenged playfully.

“Yes, exactly!”

It went right over his head.

“Okay, okay. I’ll try to do it less.”

“You won’t regret it!” As Ed stood up with his blanket, Rambley looked between the pillows and grabbed the blue one. “Dibs on this one.”

Ed gave him a thumbs up, grabbed the other one, and headed to the door.

“I’m going to hop in the shower, but I’ll try to be quiet. Should I shut this?”

“Leave it open, if you please.”

So, Ed did. He pulled it a little but left the door partially open.

“And use a lot of soap! You know where you’ve been!”

He could hear Ed laugh and smiled.

“Night, Rambley!”

“Goodnight, Eddie...!”

Rambley stared at that cracked door for a long moment before sighing and lifting himself to sit on the bed. He plopped his head into his hands as he stared at the carpet and took slow, patient breaths.

“Oh boy, Rambley,” he muttered. “There’s something really wrong with you.”

He really hoped that he wasn't giving Ed the wrong idea. He couldn't stay here forever. He could barely stay here for one night. Looks what happened earlier! Obviously, he wasn't ready to be away from the park.

His park, his home. The place he belonged. This was just a vacation. He couldn't get too comfortable with this. Just two days. Three tops. Four if Ed really wanted him to. Five if the weather was really rough.

Then he was going home.

...

But maybe he'd come back for another night. Or two. Or Christmas. It wasn't until she got off the phone with Ed that Laura started to feel a little nervous. Funny, she hadn't felt that uneasy when Ed and Rambley were heading off to the dangerous laboratory, but now that they were leaving and she was going to be here alone she started to feel antsy.

But she wasn't alone, was she?

Salem was in the other room, and if she left then they would absolutely be alone. No phone to call for help, barely able to even move themselves. She couldn't back out now.

That got her back into the proper headspace, and she took a deep breath before striding out of the kitchen and back into the front room.

Where she found Salem slumped forward over the table.

"Wha-Oh." She caught herself before she could say anything more than that strange noise, because she quickly realized that Salem hadn't passed out but instead just sagged over and nodded off.

She knew it was coming, Salem had been steadily sliding down into the booth further and further since the seizing episode they had right after Ed left. Likely the medicine hadn't kicked in yet and their overtaxed body was exhausted from hours of fighting with

itself. Rest was the best thing and while Laura didn't necessarily want to be alone in a strange diner, she knew what needed to be done.

She walked right over there and lightly knocked on the table. Salem tilted their head to look up at her, leering at her with a look of irritation and exhaustion.

"Heyyy, I think it's time for bed."

"Ya, me too."

Salem rolled their head back down.

Laura sighed and tapped her fingernail on the table. Then louder and faster, and watched as Salem's ears folded, trying to close her out until-

They suddenly shot upright with a frustrated exhale, nearly uppercutting Laura in the process and then falling back on the booth from dizziness. They pinched the bridge of their nose until the wooziness subsided.

“A’ight, fine. But if you keep doing that, I’m throwin’ you out.”

“It’s a deal,” Laura agreed. “...Want a little help?”

“Nah...”

Salem dragged themselves down the booth and pulled themselves up with a hand on the back of the seat. They were unsteady on their feet, breathing heavily as they stayed righted, and took a step forwards.

They swayed. Laura lurched forward and grabbed their upper arm with both hands to catch them. Except they weren’t actually falling so they just gave her a funny look.

For a split second, Laura caught a glimpse of a dark eye under their bang, but she looked quickly to the other one and Salem didn’t notice. Especially once she slapped on an ‘Everything’s fine!’ smile. Probably just thought Laura was being awkward.

In hindsight, Laura WAS being awkward, but she was going to give herself a pass.

Salem cracked a grin. “You could’ve just asked.”

“I could’ve just let you fall too,” Laura said matter-of-factly. She then began to tug them along. “Come on, in bed!”

They were still grinning at that comment, but Laura paid them no mind.

The bed smelled like sweat and perfume as they approached. Funny enough, but the smell of sick sweat was much less harsh than the perfume. Though maybe she had just gotten nose blind to it. She started to pull back the covers.

“Don’t bother. I’m layin’ on ‘em,” Salem said.

“We should still probably change the-.”

Salem flopped back down on the bed onto their back, sinking deep in the bedding.

“Okay, never mind. There you go.”

Laura fluffed up one of the pillows Salem wasn't laying on and offered it, and they lifted their head so she could slide it underneath.

“Thanks. Knew you were the helpful type.”

She hoped they weren't suggesting she was a busy-body or pushover.

“Only for friends,” Laura corrected.

“Considerin' me a friend already, huh?”

“Hey, anybody who gives me free stuff is a friend to me!”

Salem scoffed and cleared their throat. “Well, don't be expectin' anymore handouts. Ya already swiped enough.”

Laura gave a somewhat awkward little laugh.

“What’re you goin’ to do?” Salem asked.

“Now? Probably play around on my phone. And when I get tired, I’ll just fall over onto that stack of toys and crash.”

Salem cracked a toothy grin. “Good luck with that,” they slurred and turned over. The last of their energy petering out as they crashed themselves.

Then Laura was alone. She made short work of putting the antiviral in the fridge before retiring to the booth and retreating into her phone. She had a pair of backup wireless earbuds in her purse just for occasions like this and soon lost herself in video after video. Catching up on all the stuff she missed due to school.

At some point she laid down, still watching the phone. Then shortly later she nodded off.

The first time she woke up it was still early morning. She checked her phone for the time before drifting back off.

When she opened her eyes again there was Salem leaning over the back of the booth, propping up their head on their arm.

...Wait, when did they get there?!

“G’morning, Sleeping Beauty.”

Laura snorted awake.

“What a gal.” Their hand dragged down the back of the booth as they stepped away. “I’ve gotta step out for a bit, Doc. If you want to stick around here til your ride gets here, by my guest.”

It was a surprising transformation. Sure, Salem still looked rough, with ruffled fur and a tired, glassy eye, but they were up and about, and Laura wasn’t even expecting that. Let alone for them to jump up and

run off somewhere, which Laura wasn't entirely sure was a good thing after last night.

“Wait a second!”

Salem stopped and languidly turned back to watch Laura scramble and slip as she got out of the booth.

“Maybe I should come with you!”

“You're not going to want to go where I'm goin,”
Salem forewarned.

They continued into the kitchen with Laura following behind, watching them head to the fridge. They opened it up, giving a somewhat surprised ‘huh’ when they noticed Laura had packed in the antiviral boxes and loose bottles, lining them up neatly.

“Why, where are you going? Back to the labs?”
Laura joked.

Salem didn't answer. Instead, just taking the crab legs out of the fridge and tucking them under their arm.

But that was enough answer for Laura, whose eyes popped open.

"Wait, are you? Why?"

"To smooth things over," Salem said. Grabbing a bottle of water out of the fridge before catching the door with their foot and kicking it closed.

Smooth things over? What did they mean by... oh no.

Laura beat them around the island, cutting them off before they could reach the back door.

"Whoa, wait! You didn't say that last night," Laura said.

Salem arched a brow.

“That you and that freaky Rambley are in cahoots!”

“We’re not. We’re neighbors,” Salem smoothly dismissed. “I don’t smooth things down an’ he won’t let me back in there when I need more.”

That’s when it clicked. They were smoothing things out with the Other Rambley so he wouldn’t lock them out of the labs, because eventually the antiviral would run out again and they would have to go back.

Salem hadn’t been sneaking in and swiping it with their keycard. They had been bartering with the Other Rambley for it, and unfortunately they might’ve thrown a wrench in that little agreement.

“Oh...”

“Yeah, you see it now. We gotta live here, we gotta work together,” Salem said. They held up a crab leg for emphasis, wagging the claw towards Laura’s face teasingly. “We ain’t all as lucky as Fuzzface.”

“I don’t think I’d call Rambley lucky,” Laura said.

Salem scrunched their nose like they were preparing to argue, but then they got a thoughtful look, and finally decided to let it go. They brushed past her, almost purposely so, and stopped at the door.

“Tell ya what.” They looked back over their shoulder at her. “If yer still here when I get back, I’ll give ya a tour of the place.”

Laura blinked in almost disbelief. Salem seemed pleased with this response and opened the door.

“I don’t get you,” Laura finally said.

“Which part?”

She tossed her hands up. “All of it!”

“Good. Keep guessin’.”

With that, Salem slipped out the doorway and kicked it closed behind them. Leaving Laura standing there

in the kitchen with no clear idea of what she was expected to do.

So, she went back to the booth, sat down, and scrounged through her purse for some rolls to eat.

Meanwhile, Salem made their way across the park towards the labs.

Truthfully, they weren't fully recovered. They were chilled, their head felt tight, and they were a little unsteady, but they could tell that the antiviral took effect. It was strong and resilient, and they had to be too, because every moment they didn't clear things with Rambley they knew he was getting angrier and angrier.

Now, he wasn't watching the doors the last time they showed up. Or he was and just decided not to let them in. Honestly, with how much of a moody megalomaniac he was, they could've believed either.

This time they knew he'd be on high alert, watching to see if his real-life doppelganger was going to

creep back in. But instead, when the alerts signaled that something was beating on the glass, he switched cameras and caught Salem looking at him expectantly and thumping on the glass with both fists.

And unfortunately, they were carrying crab legs. He begrudgingly let them inside.

As soon as Salem stepped in, the intercom above buzzed to life.

“Meet me downstairs.”

“No hello?” Salem asked cheekily.

“Hello. Downstairs.”

“Subfloor one, I still ain’t all better.”

“Fine.”

To anyone looking from the outside in, it would seem like Salem was really pushing their luck, but the truth

was that Rambley preferred in-character interactions to groveling. He wanted everyone acting like they were supposed to be acting, so Salem knew better than to step out of line.

They walked into the hallway on subfloor one and headed to the nearest mounted screen before leaning on the wall. It looked casual but was really to take some of the pressure off. The stairs making their head hurt, and the headache making their neck hurt.

After a short while they heard the sound of the door to the stairs creaking, followed by the screen clicking to life with a familiar cartoon visage.

“Ugh, I’m turning off these lights,” Rambley complained.

“Sure.”

The lights were turned off, making the screen’s glow the only thing illuminating the room. Though Salem

saw fine enough in the dark so they weren't concerned.

Salem wrinkled their nose at the smell as Rambley's body shuffled in. They looked over and their eyes widened at seeing its current state.

"It's not polite to stare," Rambley tutted.

"I don't know how to tell ya this, Rams, but your body's on its way out."

"You don't think I know that?!" Rambley snapped, blowing up on a dime. "It's not like there's anything I can do about it!"

"You could stop wasting what time with it you've got and start takin' the shots."

"That's not going to fix the damage! It's too late for that..."

Rambley looked over towards his own body with disgust, wrinkling his lip and baring both teeth.

“The best chance I have is growing another and finding a way to switch, and I can’t do that either. No, they made sure of that. We’ve got bodies for allll the less important background characters shoved down in the cyro freezer, but no Rambleys. Not even one backup.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Because they already made him...”

“Speaking of him, for the record, I didn’t send him over here. I asked Ed to go. Knew you’d get a kick out of him,” Salem added.

“Oh, Ed’s a darling. A real classy guy.” His tone lightened but his gaze stayed dark. “But HE got to him first...”

“Yeah, but I heard you didn’t leave that great of a first impression.”

“How could I with this?” he asked darkly.

Salem followed his gesturing hand towards the body, and they couldn't help but sympathize.

That decaying body would've turned anyone away. It probably wasn't even safe to be around, teeming with so much disease that it was constantly foaming and drooling. That its fur was clumped with grime. Salem couldn't even tell if Rambley was doing a bad job taking care of it or if there was just so much filth that it was constantly replaced.

Though seeing how fed up Rambley was, odds were that he had mostly given up on it. Not that it would've helped much.

Rambley was fortunate that he was so connected with the systems of the labs, because if he wasn't he would've probably been feeling all of that. Instead, he got a bird's eye view of the deterioration and would be able to skirt by when it finally croaked out.

"Guess you could wait til it decomposes enough to take the chip out and plant it in somethin' else," Salem offered dryly.

Rambley scoffed. “You really don’t have any clue how any of this technology works, do you? I CAN’T! And even if I could, I just told you there aren’t any available bodies! If you’re suggesting I shove myself into that knockoff-garbage Raspberry body, you’ve got another thing-!...”

Rambley trailed off, looking to the side thoughtfully. As though he was taken off-guard by a sudden thought.

And then...

He got this look. He got this sinister smirk and glint to his eye, sly and plotting.

Salem clocked it immediately. “What’re you thinkin’ about?”

“Nothing...” Rambley looked towards them, barely disguising the look with an out-of-place smile.

“Salem, pal, could you do me a BIG, Rambley-sized favor?”

“Do I got a choice?”

“I just need you to keep an eye on my dull duplicate and his big buddy for a while. Keep me in the loop on what they’re doing out there in the park.”

“Eh, sure. Soon as they get back,” Salem said with a shrug.

“Get back where?”

“To the park. Big buddy took the dupe home with him.”

“You mean... He LEFT THE PARK?!”

Salem expected an explosion, but not one accompanied by such glee. His eyes nearly sparkling and even his delayed body excitedly raising his fists excitedly, though sluggishly.

“That’s GREAT! Good, let him go!... Well, actually that makes my plan significantly harder. But oh-ho, with him out of the park-!”

“He’s coming back,” Salem clarified.

“Oh...” the raccoon deflated. “Don’t get my hopes up.”

“Look, whatever you’re planning, count me out. I don’t want to get involved in any freaky body snatching,” Salem bluntly said.

“...You know, your body’s not so different than mine,” Rambley reminded with an irritated smile.

“You’re right. It ain’t.”

Salem uncovered their eye and shot him a proper wink with a knowing smirk that wiped away his smile.

“Just tell me when he gets back,” he said deadpanned.

Salem gave a lazy salute. “Sure thing, Boss.”

“And hand me the crab legs on the way out.”

“Suuure.”

Salem pushed off the wall and walked over towards the body, swaying a little on their feet, resisting the urge to wrinkle their nose. Couldn't risk poking the bear.

Ugh, it was a lot worse up close. And it was just staring at them, mouth agape, breathing in rough pants.

“Can you still taste with this thing?”

“Of course I can! He's braindead, not tasteless.”

“Uh huh.”

The body lifted its arms and Salem piled the legs onto them. Then they turned to head out the door.

“One more thing,” Rambley chimed up. “While Ed was in here the other day, for some reason he swiped a disc of footage from the Mollie experiments. I’m going to need that back.”

“What am I, his babysitter?” Salem asked over their shoulder.

“Nooo, but you sure are his,” he hissed out. Clearly meaning his duplicate. “Thank you in advance!”

Salem rolled their eye and headed out the door, and up the stairs, and out the front.

And only then did they release the breath they were holding.

They weren’t going to get in the middle of this. They’d only do what they had to to get by, they weren’t getting in between these two.

And if Rambley, the other Rambley, knew what was good for him... he wouldn’t come back to Indigo Park.

...

Ed woke up to the sound of soft clattering and humming coming from the kitchen. He recognized the smell of something cooking. Curious, he got up and headed into the kitchen, still blurry eyed.

There was Rambley standing at the stove, standing on the plastic stepstool he kept in the pantry to reach the upper shelves, with a spatula in one hand tending to a frying pan.

He greeted him with a cheery smile. “Morning, Eddie! I hope I didn’t wake you up. But I hope THESE did!”

Rambley set the spatula aside and whipped out a plate of already finished pancakes from the counter beside him.

“Just in time too. I couldn’t find your syrup.”

“Up there in that cabinet.” Ed started to step over.

“No, no! I’ve got it!” Rambley got on his tiptoes and stretched, then moved up onto a knee on the counter and stretched, and only once Ed started to reach- Rambley’s swatted him back- did he reach the cabinet and get it open. There was the prized bottle of syrup that he quickly snatched up. “Perfect! Ooo, and cinnamon bun flavored?! Gosh, you’ve got the best taste, Buddy. That’s why we’re such good friends.”

Ed was a little surprised to see Rambley making breakfast, let alone one that had so many steps. He didn’t even have a functional kitchen, how could he cook?

Well, somehow, he did, because at least from here the pancakes looked perfect.

“How’d you do all this?”

“Having access to the internet means I’m able to see all sorts of information! Such as, did you know all it takes is two-thirds a cup of water with this instant

pancake mix to make instant pancakes?” Rambley gave him a teasing look. “Sorry, I get to be a little cheeky.”

“I didn’t even know I had pancake mix.”

“It is pushing the date a little,” Rambley said, clicking his tongue.

“They look great!” Ed quickly added.

“Good! Here’s hoping it tastes even better! Lemme just...”

Rambley flipped the remaining pancakes and once they were done, he piled them onto the second plate, humming as he did. Another Indigo Park song, one that Ed could remember the tune of but didn’t know where it had come from. He didn’t interrupt to ask.

With the plating complete and syrup bottle in hand, everything was ready.

“So, I noticed you don’t have a table,” Rambley said.

“Uh... I could get my computer chair in here and we could sit at the counter...?” Ed asked, scratching his head and looking over. He stared at the counter for a second before turning back. “How about the coffee table?”

“That works for me!”

They carried the stuff out and Rambley got everything set up on the table. Moving the stuff on it off and into the cubby beneath and neatly setting up the plates and utensils like a proper dining room table.

Ed didn’t have any orange juice so instead he poured them a couple of glasses of lemonade. The kind that came from a packet that made about two liters, ironically in a reused orange juice bottle. Better than soda, he supposed.

He caught Rambley in mid-yawn. The raccoon was sitting on the floor on the opposite side off the coffee

table instead of the couch, so Ed matched him and sat on the floor between it and the coffee table.

“Didn’t sleep well?” he guessed.

Didn’t sleep at all, actually.

“Oh, just a little, but I’ll be fine!” Rambley assured. He stretched and readjusted his bandana as Ed poured some syrup onto his stack of pancakes. “It wasn’t the bed; I just had a lot on my mind. How about you?”

“The couch was a blast.”

That got a snicker out of him. Ed smiled and took his first bite of pancakes. They were really good, though it was hard to beat fresh pancakes. Even if they were just an off-brand instant kind.

“Maybe I’ll take a nap while you’re picking up Laura.”

Ed immediately dropped his fork onto his plate and dove back onto his couch for his phone. Rambley

watching with obvious amusement as he frantically pulled up his messaging app to check on Laura.

He was somewhat surprised Ramsey wasn't more concerned, but not once he opened the app to find newer responses that he hadn't typed up.

"Hi, Laura! It's me, Ramsey. Just checking in!"

"Text me or call me when you can!"

Laura: "Hi Ramsey!

Doing ok just woke up. Salem ran off :P but they're doing better."

"Good! I can't believe I'm saying it, but I'm really glad they're alright."

"Don't tell them I said that."

Laura: "Couldn't even if I want to lol. Where's Ed? Asleep?"

"Yup! Do you need me to wake him up?"

Laura: "No I'm ok. Let him sleep. I'm just going to chill."

“Will do! I’m going to make some breakfast soon.”

“Quick question: is milk or water better in boxed pancakes?”

Laura: “Lol as if Ed’s got good milk. XD jk I think water’s fine.”

“Thank you!”

“Me again. Good call on the milk.”

“The milk’s bad?” Ed asked.

“Oooh yeah,” Rambley replied.

And this came from someone who had eaten rats. Ed had a bad feeling he was going to be using the garbage disposal to get rid of that.

But it looked like Laura was alright. He typed up a quick message:

“Hey it’s Ed. I just got up and I’m coming over as soon as I eat if that’s cool with you.”

Before he could set the phone back down, he noticed the time gap between when Rambley sent his first messages to when Laura received it. Apparently Rambley didn't sleep well considering how early he had gotten up. No wonder he decided to make pancakes; he must've been bored.

He got an answer from Laura.

Laura: "No
prob"

So, he was in the clear to get back to the pancakes. Which was great, because that singular bite was making him hungry for a second. He slid back to the floor and began to eat, Rambley followed suit.

He stifled the second yawn, but Ed still noticed it. He decided not to bring it up though.

He did decide to bring up something else though.

"So... you like the place?"

“Oh yeah! It’s great! Very cozy. I like the layout, how you have half of your home sort of hidden away in the back. It’s very secure,” Rambley complimented.

“Think you’ll be up to staying a second night?”

“Oh, uh, well...” Rambley clicked his teeth thoughtfully. “Well, that was the plan...”

He looked up at Ed. Ed was looking back hopefully.

How could he say no to him? He put on a smile and pushed down that little ball of anxiety sitting in his stomach.

“Why not? Besides, we didn’t get a chance to try out all of your state-of-the-art non-board game games! Maybe after you get back, we could pop some corn- if you got ‘em- and see how many you can show me?”

Ed was relieved. “Sure!” he eagerly agreed.

Last night it had been long and they were tired. Tonight he could stay awake long enough to give Rambley a proper night off. It would be great! He'd figure out how to fit the stream in later.

"Who knows. Maybe you'll come back and spend Christmas here."

And he realized that was a step too far. The startled look on Rambley's face tipped him off.

"Or maybe not. We could just have Christmas at your place," he quickly and casually brushed off.

"W-Well maybe," Rambley mused thoughtfully. His tail flicking behind him as he tapped his fingers on the table. "Gosh, it would be my first holiday away from the park... Then again by then I'm usually in torpor anyways. Sure! Er, maybe! But wait, what about the fireplace? You don't have one, how are we going to hang stockings?"

"We can hang them on the counter."

“...You know, that’s not a bad idea! We could put some candles on top, maybe a little Christmas Tree. There’s plenty of decorations to work at back at the park that I’ll gladly let you borrow. That might just work!”

The idea, despite considering it himself, filled him with a mix of excitement and anxiety, but the thought of decorating this place for Christmas and then celebrating with someone did give him a fuzzy feeling.

Watching those old Indigo Christmas specials on repeat alone just wasn’t going to cut it anymore.

“You know what? It sounds great, Eddie! We can do all that Christmas-y stuff that I haven’t been able to but always wanted to!” His eyes brightened with excitement. “Just think about it! We could make a gingerbread house and decorate the tree- we could even make those popcorn streamers you always see in old cartoons and vintage Christmas cards! Oh, oh, and when we get snow we can sneak back to the park and go sledding and ice skating, then we can

come back here and make hot chocolate and sit in front of the-... counter! We'll make it work, trust me."

Ed grinned in amusement. Rambley raised a finger matter-of-factly.

"Just one little thing we need to clear up. I noticed it's a little cool in here. Now I'm fine, I have plenty of fur to keep me toasty, but what's the heating situation?" Rambley asked.

"I can turn it up."

"Good! Not that I'm complaining but if it gets chilly we miiight have to share the bed for warmth. Not that you'd mind."

Wait, what?

"With how fluffy and cuddly I am and all. I don't mean to brag, but I would make the BEST living plushie!"

Rambley finished with a beaming smile. Back to his old tricks it seemed.

But this time Ed wasn't going to let that slide. He finished his bite of pancakes and replied.

"You sure would, Buddy. That's why I keep you around. Just in case I need to grab you for a quick squeeze."

That was supposed to be a callback to what Rambley said about the syrup, but in hindsight he realized he had said that's why they were friends not keeping him around.

Not that it mattered because it hit its mark. Rambley's brows shot up, eyes as wide as saucers, and then before Ed could wonder if he made a huge mistake, Rambley got the downright goofiest smile he had ever seen from him.

"W-Well, I'm good for that! That's exactly what I was made for in fact! Heh, you wouldn't have to ask me twice."

Rambley fumbled his fork with a nervous little chuckle.

It was cute. He considered telling him so but decided against it. Rambley looked flustered enough as it was. He let him off the hook for now.

It was very human too.

Funny enough but Ed had gotten so familiar with Rambley that it was like sometimes he forgot he wasn't another human. He was staring at an AI inside of a plush raccoon and yet it felt just like another human, and it was crazy to think that he wasn't.

Ed briefly considered if it bothered him and soon realized that no, it really didn't. It was just funny to think about.

Raccoon body, robot mind, human cute.

“Alright, Eddie. Now you’re just staring at me. What are you thinking about?”

Well, now he had no choice but to go for the kill.

“I’m thinking about squeezing you.”

“Oh no you’re not! You’re just teasing me. Quit it,” Rambley brushed off. Though he did that thing where he would turn away as though to hide a non-existent blush. “Just finish your pancakes so you can get out of here and leave me in peace.”

“Can do,” Ed said and returned to eagerly downing the pancakes.

Rambley seemed a little disinterested in the food, poking at it a little before returning to his ideas for Christmas, both at the park and here. Overall, he seemed to be doing a lot better than the day before.

In fact, he didn’t bring it up once, and neither did Ed.

Rambley yawned again.

Once they had finished, Ed got dressed to get going while Rambley moved the dishes into the sink to soak. But before he left, he made sure Rambley was comfortable.

“Here’s the remote. This is the button that pulls up the menu, just click on whatever you want. If you want to rent something that’s cool, but if it tells you that you have to upgrade you can just go back with this-.”

“Yeesh, Eddie. How long are you planning on being gone? I think I can manage for a few hours!”

Rambley chuckled. “Though if it’s anymore than four I’ll have to pull all the stuffing out of your couch pillows. It’s just the law of raccoons.”

“Of course.” Ed handed him the cellphone. “Keep my phone just in case. If anyone knocks, don’t answer it. And, uh... that’s it.”

“Don’t you worry about a thing! Especially not me, I’ll be staying away from the windows,” Rambley

assured. He gently nudged Ed towards the front door. “Call me when you get there!”

“I will. No problem.”

Shortly afterwards, Ed headed out the door. The last thing he saw before closing it was Rambley waving from the living room.

Then Rambley waited.

And waited.

And once he was sure that Ed was in his car or at least close, he turned on his heel and headed straight into Ed’s office. He just had to see that Indigo Parked-themed conspiracy board Ed had been hiding- and it felt weird snooping around in there while he was asleep on the couch.

But now? Rambley had free reign of the house and all the goodies hidden inside. He was going to see exactly what Ed had discovered about the park.

Or that's what he was planning on, but he noticed something had changed once he had gotten in there.

"Gee, this corkboard looks a little lighter than I remember," Rambley remarked. He got a little smirk. "Sly dog, Eddie... But not sly enough for a raccoon!"

He slinked over to his desk and started to look through some of the papers there, only to have his cunning grin slack into a guilty frown.

Maybe he didn't want to see what he uncovered. After yesterday... and if Ed had one thing about Lloyd being his favorite on that board it was going to take all the wind out of his sails. Maybe if he asked politely later, he could get Ed to show him some of those newspaper clippings he had tacked up. Surely!

BUT he could go on his computer! He wouldn't snoop; he could just watch some videos on a much bigger screen than his cellphone.

He hopped up into his- very comfortable- office chair and took it for a spin before setting the phone on the

desk and turning on the computer. Only to be instantly stopped by a password screen.

“Oh right. There would be a password...” Rambley mumbled. And he couldn’t call Ed to ask since he was likely driving by now. Maybe Laura would know?

He tapped his fingers together. It was a shame he wasn’t in the park, or he could just bypass it.

...Maybe he still could? That was crazy! He was nowhere near the park, and he was built for its systems. It wouldn’t work.

...But he was specifically made to connect to systems wirelessly and with a very limited signal. Sure, he had permissions in the park, especially with Ed’s help in getting more access, but hooking onto the actual system itself should’ve been the same here. It was just connecting onto a computer, right?

Well, it was worth a shot. Rambley unfocused his eyes and started trying to connect in.

It was hard to explain what it felt like. It was like reaching into a void and feeling for sparks of communications to connect with. At the park it was easy, as they surrounded him. All over he could feel things to tap into and brush up on, but here it was like stepping into an empty room and blindly feeling for anything in the dark.

Nothing. He continued to reach, and feel, searching and recalculating until his fingers were numb and all his senses were dulled. Something. Feeling. Something. There had to be something.

And...

A connection.

Ed had left his Bluetooth on.

Rambley seized it, and his head spun as he did. A new connection, but a familiar one. A computer, a line, moving inside and inhabiting it like a ghost- and then immediately hitting a brick wall. A firewall, actually. No dice.

But he didn't need to get past the firewall. All he needed to do was get past this password screen.

And it took a while. Poking and prodding, shifting things without moving them, like he was poking a Rubix cube into completion. Poke, nudge, trying to ignore the dozens upon hundreds upon thousands of numbers and phrases that streamed through his vision. He couldn't get the password.

But he didn't need the password. He just needed to nudge some things until the computer believed he had already put in the password. A little shift in permissions, as it was. It sounded easy. It was like finding a needle in a haystack and then using it to unpick a lock. Except it was only precise in how methodical it was, it was still brute forcing his way in.

And then suddenly the welcome loading screen came on and the desktop came up. Rambley recognized the shift and pulled out, lurching back as the world moved a little too fast but steadying himself in Ed's chair.

He blinked until his vision solidified and then brightened with a beaming smile as he saw the desktop open before him.

He did it. He had gotten in. He had broached a system outside of Indigo Park's own. He could go anywhere! He could do anything!

So, what was he going to do first?!

...

He pushed back the keyboard and just laid his head down on the desk. Maybe a quick two-minute nap wouldn't hurt... Ed made it to Indigo Park and hiked all the way across it to Spoiled Swamp. It felt weird not having Rambley guiding the way. In fact, it felt pretty lonely. To the point where he went to get out his phone and call him before he remembered why he couldn't.

And why he also couldn't fall in a hole and break his leg before he reached Salem's, he reminded himself

as he hopped over a crack. Then again, it wouldn't be the first time he had a rule like that in his line of work.

But thankfully, he was used to dodging literal and figurative pitfalls, so he made it to Spoiled Swamp without much issue. He went around the back of Salem's diner and let himself in the back.

"Laura?"

"Hey!" Laura called from the other room. She hurried to greet him, and they met at the doorway again.

"You got here fast! Did Rambley come with you?"

"No, he stayed at my place."

"That's probably for the best. He had a long day yesterday."

"Yeah. I don't think he slept much last night..." Ed admitted. "Well, let's get going! I should get back to him."

Laura got that smile she got whenever she was about to propose something that she would have to shmooze Ed to get away with.

“Actually, maybe we should stay. Salem said if I’m still here when they get back, they’ll give me a tour of the swamp. And I could probably shmooze you a second spot,” she suggested.

Even she knew what she was doing.

Now this gave Ed a mix of feelings. He did want to continue exploring the park and seeing what he could find, especially since he hadn’t seen much of Spoiled Swamp, but he didn’t trust Salem entirely. That was part of the reason he hadn’t seen much of the area.

And not only that, but Rambley was waiting back at the apartment and Ed couldn’t help but feel paranoid about leaving him alone. At any second, he could drum up a mental image of Rambley running down the street while cop cars and a mob of people

chased him. Not entirely believable and somewhat goofy but not assuring.

“I don’t know. I don’t know if I should leave Rambley alone that long,” he said.

“Aww, come on! You love this stuff!” Laura said with a nudge. “Unleeeess you were just coming back for Rambley,” she teased.

“Yes,” Ed bluntly challenged.

“No, come on. Let’s check it out.”

“Didn’t you get enough of Salem last night?”

“No, they spent most of it passed out.”

“...Alright but let me call Rambley first and make sure he’s cool with it. Can I borrow your phone?”

“Didn’t you get enough of him last night?” Laura asked cheekily and handed it over.

“Nope.”

...

The beginning had something to do with a strawberry patch, he couldn't really remember. He remembered that he had to climb back in the bedroom window to get into Ed's apartment. Finley was in the bathtub.

Then there was a loud knock on the door. Rambley turned his head and could see through the gaped blinds, watching as a familiar orange head peeked from around the corner.

“Oh no!” Rambley sprinted to the door and flung it open. “What are you doing here?!”

“I was coming to look for you! My, what a fancy abode!” Lloyd gushed. He then stepped clean over Rambley and into the apartment. “This is fascinating! Just fascinating!” he continued to gush as he wandered inside.

His elbow hit the slated pantry door and it broke off its track and fell over onto the floor uselessly. Which immediately caused an alarm to go off in the kitchen.

Oh, great! Now the police were going to think someone was breaking in!

“Now, you see?! You’ve been in here for five seconds and you already broke something! You need to get out, now!” Rambley spat, pointing towards the open doorway. There was a small crowd standing outside staring inside with mouths gaping and wide eyes. “AND YOU LED PEOPLE HERE, YOU BIG LUGHEAD!”

Rambley slammed the door shut, but he knew they could still get in. He had to stop the alarm, it was obviously luring more people in. Soon the police would come to investigate too! They’d knock them out and drag them off to be examined by scientists, or worse put them in a zoo!

He raced into the kitchen and climbed onto the counter and then reached up over the fridge to the

alarm, which looked like a smoke alarm, stuck to the ceiling. He pulled it off but it continued ringing, and there was no switch to turn it off or any batteries to pull out.

Instead, Rambley chomped down on it and his teeth crunched straight through the plastic like a piece of toast. It tasted like nothing, thankfully, though it didn't stop it from ringing.

“Oh, come on!” He smacked the alarm on the fridge, trying to shatter it. No good.

He leapt towards the floor, throwing the alarm down at the tiled floor and watching it shatter at his feet. But it still rang.

“Come oooNNN!” Rambley shouted again.

But then he suddenly had a weird feeling and looked out of the kitchen and towards the living room.

Lloyd's head was sticking around the corner with a big- no, HUGE, toothy grin. It was downright creepy, and he was dead silent while doing it.

“What are you doing?!” Rambley called.

Lloyd came staggering around the corner. His whole body loose and wobbly like a plush toy that lost all its stuffing. He raced towards Rambley.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!” Rambley screamed.

Too creepy! He opened the window and hopped through, running from all the people by hopping over the railing and landing onto the sidewalk without even a wince of pain. Then he began to book it, across the parking lot, down the street, and around the corner to Jetstream Junction.

And wouldn't you know it, but there was Mollie pushing her plane out from the entrance doors and testing the air with a feather finger.

“Mollie!” Rambley chirped happily. He ran right up to her and hugged her around the legs. “Oh Mollie, I’ve missed you so much! Where were you?!”

“Oh, hi Rambley! I just flew in,” she replied. She looked so much taller than he remembered, but it was really her!

But she wasn’t alone. There were a lot of other people and characters in her garage to welcome her home. Though Rambley didn’t pay much attention.

Then they walked through the park together. Mollie’s face was scrunched up with sadness at seeing the park, but Rambley was quick to assure her.

“It’s okay! We’re going to fix it all up.”

“But HOW, Rambley?!” she wailed.

“Uh... We’ll get a loan!” Rambley said, snapping his fingers at the idea. “I’ll get Eddie to get a loan, and we can use the money to fix up the park!”

“Gosh, Rambley, that might work! But who’s Eddie?”

And then it suddenly clicked.

Where WAS Ed?

Was... Was he not real? Was it all just a dream and there was no Ed? Rambley’s heart ached painfully. There had to be a mistake. He knew Ed was real.

But that would explain why he hadn’t left the park, wouldn’t it? He was standing here right now and there was no Ed, and he was awake.

Maybe he wasn’t real at all. The thought of it made Rambley’s heart hurt, and he folded his hands together and looked around desperately for any sign of him.

“Hey, what’s Lloyd doing?” he heard Mollie ask.

He heard rapid footsteps racing up behind him.

“Don’t look at Lloyd. Don’t look at Lloyd,” Rambley muttered lowly. He shielded his face with his hand and looked at the floor.

He could see Lloyd’s feet. They weren’t cartoony, they were like mascot feet. Furry. Stained with brown- not copper, brown. Not copper.

Lloyd was standing over him.

“Lloyd, you’re scaring me...” he mumbled.

And Lloyd said-

“Rambley the Raccoon, I love you.”

“WhAT?!”

And then the fire alarm started going off again.

“Lloyd, you’re just trying to get me to look at you! I’m NOT looking at you! I know you have a creepy face!” Rambley accused. He angled towards Mollie. “Moll, tell him!”

Mollie bent down and twisted her head around to look up at Rambley.

“Ugh,” Rambley said in minor disgust.

The alarm was still ringing.

Wait, no. That wasn’t an alarm.

Wait, that was the phone!

Rambley yanked his head up from the desk, eyes still too blurry to make sense of the colors on the computer screen as he reached over for Ed’s cell phone. He answered it quickly.

“Mmph, hello?”

Ed was a little surprised. The hushed, husky voice almost didn’t sound like Rambley’s. It took him a beat to realize it was because he was entirely out of character.

“Hey, it’s just me.”

“Oh, hey Eddie!” Rambley’s voice brightened up instantly. “Uh, heh, sorry. I might’ve fallen asleep,” he said while rubbing his eye.

“No problem, I thought you might’ve. Sorry to wake you up but I just got to Salem’s and I’m with Laura,” Ed explained.

Now he was wishing he hadn’t called a second time, but it spooked him a little when Rambley didn’t pick up. In hindsight it made sense, especially since Rambley said he hadn’t slept well.

He heard voices over the phone. Was that Lloyd?
He smiled.

“Watching an Indigo cartoon?” he guessed.

“Yeah, it’s...” Rambley heard the voices too and assumed that it was a cartoon that he must’ve put on while half awake. He looked up at the screen.

It was a video file that had started the second he had woken up, assumedly from how far into it it was, and it was his exact dream. There he was running across the parking lot at breakneck speed.

Rambley's eyes went as wide as saucers, and he frantically clicked to x out the file. Panic causing the fur on the back of his neck to stand up on end.

He located the video in the files. It had tucked itself in Ed's downloads, and Rambley wasted no time in sending it to the trash. There! Wouldn't be missed.

But that was really weird. He had accidentally projected to the Indigo screens more times than he could count, but it usually didn't upload a file. Must've been something weird with his chip and Ed's computer clashing.

"It's...?"

Oh yeah, and Ed was still on the phone.

“It’s all good! Just taking it easy,” Rambley said, stretching back into the chair and scratching his head. “How’s Laura? Did Salem leave her in one piece?”

“Funny you should ask, because Salem offered to take her on a tour of Spoiled Swamp and I’m thinking about taking them up on the offer.”

“Hmm, that’s a little risky, isn’t it? Salem isn’t exactly the chummiest person. We know how they feel about having people wandering the park, let alone their territory,” Rambley pointed out.

“Which means this might be our only chance,” Ed said.

“Maybe. But they have played tricks in the past. Even if we did just help them out...” Rambley couldn’t help but be concerned.

He didn’t anticipate Salem to do anything vile, but they could set up another trick that wound up with Ed and Laura soaked in funky blue slime.

“What exactly did they say?”

“They told Laura if she was still here when they got back, they’d give is a tour.”

“Oh HO! Laura, eh?” Rambley’s tone shifted instantly.

Ed knew that tone. He heard it out of Laura’s mouth minutes ago.

“Weeeell, if they’re planning on taking Laura then I’m sure they won’t mind if you tag along... too much,” Rambley said slyly. He became more serious, “Just be careful, okay? Who knows the full extent of the damage around Spoiled Swamp. There were a lot of water features that could be stagnating, try not to get any in your mouth.”

“I’ll do my best, Chief,” Ed said with a salute he couldn’t see. “But what about you? It might be a while.”

“Aww, you worry about me too much, Eddie. I can handle it! I’ll probably be sleeping through most of it,” he admitted sheepishly. “But if Salem pulls anything, you better give them heck for me!”

“Oh yeah, straight into the port-a-potty.”

“Ha, ha. Funny.”

“Too soon?”

“It will never be too late. Or, hmm... Well, you get what I mean,” Rambley tsked. “But be careful for me, please?”

Ed smiled to himself. “Always.”

“Good! Call me back when you want!”

“I will. Get some rest!”

“Heh, I will.”

They said goodbye and hung up.

But despite what he said, he was feeling too awake to go back to sleep. The keyboard wasn't that comfy.

Best to do something of value. He cracked his knuckles and clicked open the internet browser.

Time to do some research of his own. He had done it on the phone to a degree, but this time he wanted to get a little deeper. There had to be something he could find, that he missed before.

So, he typed in 'What happened to Indigo Park'? Noticing that there were similar searches already made by Ed.

What followed was a stream of articles that Rambley quickly scanned through, and soon it became apparent that he wasn't going to find the answers he was looking for.

It was the same narratives; spontaneous sinkhole, bankruptcy, gas leak, ect. Nobody knew what happened, but the kneejerk reaction was to assume

that nothing truly sketchy happened. Sure, there were some conspiracy theories, but even they related to the park having unexpectedly closed due to some safety issue or lawsuit risk.

Which wasn't technically wrong but wasn't interesting. Especially since Rambley knew it wasn't true.

He gave up quickly and switched to the next topic. 'Indigo Park Mascots'.

A video was recommended on a channel called IndigoParkArchive and Rambley felt his heartrate quicken as he considered whether to click on it or not. Would he see himself or the other Rambley? The-... old Rambley?

"Okay..." He took a deep breath and clicked on the video. "Here we go..."

The video started with a zoom in of the front gates leading into Indigo Park. All painted and pretty like

they were in the glory days. Over which a narrator spoke up.

“Hi! I’m Rambley, Rambley the Raccoon!”

A wave of anxious sourness rose in Rambley’s stomach. It sounded like him, but it didn’t sound like him too. He couldn’t tell if it was someone doing an impression or a voice actor from the movies... or the Other Rambley- a thought that immediately increased the sourness, but something was wrong about it.

“Are you ready to have high flying adventures, explore deep under the sea, and watch the world’s most spectacular performances? Well, have I got just the place for you!”

He felt weird. Almost like he was outside his body while being in it. Unreal, maybe. Disassociated? Off. That was a good word for it, he felt off.

But he watched as the footage cut between the various attractions in the park. Then back to the

gate, where it opened and faded out into a sparkly flourish and into Main Street, again back how it used to be. When nothing was crumbly and broken, when the windows were clean as a whistle, and when the streets were filled with parkgoers.

“Welcome to Indigo Park, where the fun never stops! Take a ride on my train or sail out to sea in the Pirate Grotto, or even journey to the edge of the galaxy in our brand new, state-of-the-art dark ride, Space Race! You can even meet me, Rambley the Raccoon, and all my pals!”

Rambley’s heartrate spiked the moment before it cut to the mascot of himself.

But then he deflated as he saw that it was neither him, nor his creepy original version. Instead, it was one of the wearable suits waving at the screen. It was an equal mix of relief and disappointment.

“So, why don’tcha come on down to Indigo Park and make all your dreams can come true? Next stop: Indigo Park!”

...Maybe... Maybe he didn't feel like looking at videos of the park right now...

But there was one thing he was curious about.

“So, when did this ad come out? If Space Race was just out... Then that means the Other Rambley was the mascot. Why wasn't he in the commercial?” He answered his own question with a flat expression.

“Because nobody would show up if his mug was front and center. He would've scared the living daylights out of kids.”

And he probably did. And that's probably why he was replaced.

What a chilling thought. Rambley had always considered that the models were swapped, but... but it was supposed to be him! It was supposed to be a jump from one body to another, not a whole new Rambley.

No wonder they left him behind...

No, he couldn't think like that. He was fine! He had all the freedom to do what he wanted and look where he was: outside of the park! He made the choice to leave, and now he could go anywhere! Or stay with Ed.

But the wheels in his head started to turn. Maybe the old Rambley was too ugly to be in a commercial...

"But maybe there was one with me in it out there. Somewhere."

So, he started looking, and he found more advertisements. He even found an online post about the 'creepy' mascots of Indigo Park- a title that made his heart sink. He gulped as he clicked on and then found that it was talking about Mollie's mascot.

In hindsight, Mollie's mascot wasn't as cute as the real thing...

But there was no sign of himself. Not even a mention of a new Rambley mascot, and if any videos of him

were out there then they were scrubbed from the internet.

And that should've been a good thing, but now with the whole not being the first thing, he couldn't help but be... disappointed.

It wasn't like he had been erased from history; it was like he never even existed in it. Did any of the kids he hugged even remember him? Did they think he was a fake? Probably, likely.

"Ugh..." He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Bad time to be gone, Eddie. Bad time..."

He lifted his head and tiredly scrolled through searches and videos, moving away from the mascots and just browsing the dozens of topics on Indigo Park. Then images.

Images of old advertisements of the park. Of the park. Of movie posters. Of the past. Of the park in its prime. Him, but not him. Over and over again...

Until-

“...Huh... Wait, what’s that?”

There was a poster advertisement for a movie that Rambley didn’t recognize.

Lloyd was up front and center with his usual dumb smile with Rambley beside him- no, behind him- and on the other side were a couple of characters who he didn’t recognize. Including a sultry looking female cheetah, an excitable tiger cub wearing a baseball cap, and in the way back something that was clearly the villain and possibly a... bear? It was wearing a top hat and cape, like a purple clad magician. It was hard to tell.

In the way far background of the poster there was a Hollywood sign that instead read ‘Starlight Heights’. So, maybe it was supposed to be an Indigo Cartoon version of Hollywood? Maybe- another- Indigo Goes Hollywood plotline recycled into a Lloyd movie?

But the most important thing was the actual title:
Lloyd on the Big Screen!

Because Rambley, who knew about every Indigo film and cartoon, had never seen this one before.

“I never heard of this one. Was it cancelled? Maybe after the park closed.”

He typed it up and looked and... Wait, did that say it came out in 2019?

As in after the park closed?

He had to double check and soon his mouth dropped open as he discovered the shocking truth.

“WAIT, INDIGO IS STILL MAKING MOVIES?!”

And the answer was no. They weren't.

A few quick checks showed that more than likely these movies were made before the park closed but then held onto and released after. They were even

released under a different company name, Sunset Studios, which was either a fake name or a company created strictly to release these movies that got bought out with the rest of Indigo's assets.

It was... messy, to say the least. And a little disappointing.

But there were new movies! There were a handful of them, including this weird Lloyd one- which was somehow never brought up when all those people online were talking about how much they loved Lloyd.

It must've been bad. It looked bad.

In fact, they all looked- ugh- okay, three of them were clearly about Lloyd. They were probably awful, but...

There he was! Rambley the Raccoon, he was front and center on the last one! Even if it was just a Christmas Special- but they were called 'special's for a reason!

Hold on, and since when did ‘Mollie, Ahoy!’ have a third season?!

Forget Lloyd’s lame Hollywood movie, THAT was worth ditching the computer for.

He hustled out to the living room and turned on the TV to browse and sure enough he found the whole series was accessible from Ed’s streaming service. He then hurried off again to grab Mollie’s disk.

“Come on, Moll! You’ve got to see what I’ve found!” he said excitedly.

He cradled her close as he hurried back to the couch and hopped on right as the introduction ended and the first episode of the third season began.

And the moment it opened on Mollie’s smiling face Rambley felt all his earlier worries slip away. He hugged her disc to his chest.

It was like he had his best friend back already.

...

Salem still had a headache when they got back to the diner. Though now it wasn't just from the inflammation alone. There was definitely the familiar throb of a tension headache.

Funny. As different as the two Rambleys were they both knew how to give them a headache.

But at least they were back home. They were fit to pass out now. Get a swig of some water, collapse into bed, and hopefully wake up before any bold rats crawled in and tried to chew at their face.

And then they walked through the kitchen and into the main room to find Laura and Ed sitting at the booth. Laura with a smile like she knew she wasn't supposed to be there and Ed with a much more cautious one.

Salem knew exactly why she stuck around. Damn their mouth.

But they couldn't let either of them see that tiredness, see that edge of weakness. They had an excuse last night but now they had to be back on, and they did with a sly grin and a hand on their hip.

"So, you decided to stick around. And it looks like ya picked up a straggler too."

Well since he was here anyways, maybe they could weasel that disc out of him. He had his backpack, so it was probably in there.

Laura furrowed her brows. "Wait, you were serious about the tour, right?"

"I'm a biofreak of my word," Salem agreed. They glanced towards Ed. "Don't know what you're sittin' around here waitin' for."

Ed got a startled look like he only then realized he might be uninvited. Like a kicked puppy, one that was way smaller than Barlow.

“Eh, I think we can squeeze you in. As long as ya keep those sticky fingers to yerself,” Salem continued.

“They’ll stay in my pockets,” Ed promised.

“Ya, well they better be the only things in there. You swipe from me again and you’re going in the hole.”

For a spilt second Ed considered asking if there was an actual hole or if that was a nod towards the port-a-potty.

“Both’a ya’ll get up. We don’t got all day fer this,” Salem said.

Laura sprung up from her seat. “Neither do we! Let’s go.”

Salem scoffed a little. “You got plans after this?”

“Yeah, with a hot shower and my bed,” Laura retorted snarkily.

Salem arched a brow a little but seemed almost impressed by the response. Getting the ghost of a smile before leading them out, with Laura quick on their heels.

Ed was already feeling like a third wheel. Eh, wouldn't be the first time. Didn't stop him from trolloping along behind them.

Soon they were outside in the chilly, but sunny day. Not a cloud in the sky but the sun didn't offer much warmth. The walk at least would generate some heat. They walked over a bridge and down a path edged by fake mushrooms, one half damaged to reveal the fiberglass inside while some of the others under the trees grew moss on them.

They passed an information kiosk that Ed took notice of. It was kind of a bummer that Rambley wasn't there to chime in and give the tour himself. Maybe banter with Salem over details about what each color of fake mushroom meant.

But in hindsight, it was a relief no Rambley appeared. Because if it did, there was no doubt it would be the wrong one.

“Spoiled Swamp doesn’t got as many tunnels under it as the rest of the park. So, everything sinks in its own sludge but doesn’t collapse under the weight of its failures,” Salem explained. “Which means: watch your step. You go falling in and I’m not going in after ya, Ed.”

Well, that was a surprisingly sudden callout. But he got the message.

“Loud and clear,” he said.

“Good.”

“Do you ever go outside the park? Like to forage?”
Laura asked.

“Nah, I only forage what’s grown in over the wall. Got a garden off that way.” They gave a noncommittal gesture in a random direction. “Most

food comes from hunting and caches. Spoiled Swamp had one of the smallest caches in the park, so I had to work for my meal. And I don't mean to brag, but I've been living good."

"I can tell."

"I'm choosing to take that as a compliment," Salem said, side-eyeing her.

"It was! I wasn't- Okay, obviously I wasn't," Laura defended, gesturing towards Salem's body.

"Uh huh."

Ed decided to cover by steering the conversation elsewhere. "Do any of the rides still run? It looks like a lot of these are carnival attractions, so maybe they're still kicking?"

Laura scrunched up her face. "I don't know. There's a lot of moisture over here."

“There’s one still runnin’,” Salem replied. Then turned to smirk at Laura. “But ya don’t have to ride if yer too scared. Might break a nail.”

“Hey, if I was afraid of getting dirty, I wouldn’t have stuck around to hike wearing this,” Laura retorted. She gestured down at her clothes, which were now wrinkled but still the nicer clothes she wore to Ed’s family’s Thanksgiving dinner. “And I didn’t hike around just to NOT see the only working attraction. Let’s go!”

“A’ight, but it’s your funeral,” Salem said cryptically.

They hiked far into the western side of Spoiled Swamp, right up on the wall that led to the next section of the park.

That’s where they found the attraction in question. It was a typical carnival attraction with six arms that spun around itself. The difference being that instead of typical cars, it had hanging booths. Sort of like what you would see dangling from a Ferris Wheel except they were shaped like pots.

Riders would be strapped in and spin in the pot as it spun around the central base. Disorientating, way more than Rooftop Races. But by now Ed had ridden much rougher and hadn't been chugging anything this morning, so he was good to go... that is, if the thing could spin around without unscrewing itself and slinging them off into the muck nearby.

"This is the Cauldron Stirrer. Still works if ya'll want to go for a spin," Salem said. They looked between the two with a smirk. "Last chance to back out."

"Of an old carnival ride that's sitting in water and was abandoned years ago and never received any maintenance or checks since? No way!" Laura said sarcastically with a grin of her own. "Try keeping me off of it!"

Laura would've never ridden this if it wasn't to show off for Salem. She knew it, Ed knew it, and if he didn't, he would've noticed from how her hands twisted on her purse strap as they approached the ride to board.

Though both were having second thoughts when Salem walked to the rust control booth and opened the door, and there was so much duct tape on the control panel that both could see it even from that small glimpse.

With just a few minutes of tinkering, the attraction turned on and the purple lights lining it alit- well, most of them. A staticky hum of spooky but jazzy music began to play, with the ambience of bubbling and brewing in the background. The Cauldron Stirrer was on!

The arms were lowered down into the boarding position and the hatches opened to step inside.

“Okay, dump off your stuff and get on,” Salem said while dusting off their hands.

Ed and Laura put down their backpack and purse respectively beside the control booth and walked around the railing cue to board.

“Want me to ride first to make sure it’s safe?” Ed offered.

“N... No. It should be okay. It looks okay,” Laura said.

“I don’t think Salem will care.”

“Oh, Salem WILL say something,” Laura said with more determination. “Come on. We ride together; we die together.”

“...On second thought, how about you ride first.”

Ed cheeky look gave away that he was kidding. Laura still made an obvious show of rolling her eyes exaggeratedly. Then both climbed into the cauldron.

The seats were covered in dried grime and a mix of leaves and gunk clogged up the floorboards. The seats must’ve also been dry rotted as when they sat down, they cracked and crunched, but at the very least the latches seemed secured when they locked into place.

Salem, who was leaning on the console, pressed a couple of buttons. The doors on the cauldrons shut and the arms began to lift and get in position to spin. But then they stayed stuck there unmoving.

Salem reached out through the open window and grabbed up Ed's backpack, setting it on the console and unzipping it before sifting through the stuff inside.

"Hey, whoa! What are you doing?" Ed called.

"Just looking," Salem said.

Apparently, they didn't find what they were looking for as they gave up and dropped the backpack back through the window and onto the ground. Then they checked something on their nails.

The ride was still frozen.

"...Now what?" Laura asked.

“Now’s the part where I hold ya hostage,” Salem remarked, not even looking up.

“You better not!”

“You can’t be serious!” Ed chimed in, very sure that Salem WAS serious.

“Nah, the thing’s just warmin’ up,” Salem smirked. They kicked the control box. “C’mon, ya hunk of junk.”

Laura sort of grimaced at that and gave Ed a flat look.

He shrugged back with a smile, “Wellll, you were the one who wanted to- WHOA!”

All at once the Cauldron Stirrer lurched to life and without much buildup at all it began to turn, and then shortly afterwards the cauldron cups began to spin.

Laura began screaming at the top of her lungs. Probably more out of repressed terror than actual thrill.

Ed silently rode off the buzz of adrenaline with his jaw locked and his eyes shut to block out the immediate disorientation. It was better with his eyes closed, but it still felt like he was twisting out of control on a ride that could break at any second. Like he'd dare to peek just to watch as their cauldron was thrown halfway across the park.

Yup, best to keep his eyes closed and risk the jeers from Salem.

But Salem didn't need any more ammunition. They were watching from the booth with amusement as they watched the two get slung around.

"Aww, yer doin' great! Only screamin' a lil more than the little kids so!" they called out.

No doubt Laura couldn't hear them over her own screams.

But then Salem noticed something. Something that made them step out of the booth and squint, blocking their eye from the sunlight and squinting into the distance.

Salem had much better night vision than during daytime, and was usually working with one eye blocked, but they could tell that the light in the tallest tower was on.

They squinted with disapproval and went back to man the controls, making sure the ride shut off when it was time to and let them off.

Ed and Laura came off the ride staggering. Laura decided to stop and slump over the railing, holding her nose and trying to pop her ears to stave off the dizziness. Ed recovered a lot quicker but decided to take a breather after what could've been a dance with death and sat down on the steps to do so.

Salem strode up to him and pointed off, a pointed look of accusation in their eye.

“You two screwing around in the Haunted Castle?”
they asked.

“I haven’t even been up there!” Laura said
defensively.

“Not you two. Him and Dumpster Diver. Up there?”

Ed looked back at the Haunted Castle, which he
could only really see the highest tower of.

“Why? Did you see something?” he asked.

“The light’s on.”

Oh yeah, it was. The tower was almost like a
lighthouse. It had windows pointing out across the
park and when it got dark, they would come on.
Probably to lure in parkgoers since the castle ride
was a popular attraction to ride after dark. Ed could
remember seeing that tower light when he was a kid.

“We went up there, but we didn’t turn anything on,” he admitted.

...Wait, no. Rambley did. He turned the whole ride on. BUT Ed didn’t remember there being lights on in the castle afterwards. They’d rode the tram past it pretty recently and it had been dark.

Maybe they had just been distracted?... They should’ve noticed it before now, they had been by enough to do so. Wouldn’t Rambley have brought it up? He always noticed and explained stuff like that. But it WAS up so high that it could’ve been hard to see from the tram...

“I don’t know...” Ed admitted. “Maybe...?”

“How long ago was that?”

“Before we went to the labs. The first time. We passed through trying to get there.”

Salem’s features softened a little, seemingly believing him.

“A’ight, just don’t go doin’ that. Betcha noticed how much’a this junk is run by generators, ya? Power’s a finite resource around here. We can’t waste it on that place. It ain’t livable.

“Can you shut it off?”

“Nah, Fuzzy’s gotta do it. Get on him ‘bout it when he gets back or I’m draggin’ him out there myself.”

And knowing Salem would absolutely do so, Ed agreed without question.

Laura took a couple of zoomed in pictures of the tower.

Then they continued on. Walking further into Spoiled Swamp. Salem making a few cracks at their expense along the way and not suggesting anymore rides.

“Might give yerself whiplash if ya don’t burn your voice out screamin’,” they said.

Frankly, Ed had a hunch that nothing else was working. Once they got up towards the northern side with more water features, he noticed a lot of it really had become a swamp, sunken into itself.

There was one building that stood out, hidden behind a half-fallen fence and some fake poisoned trees. Either there being no path to it or it being hidden somewhere behind it.

The most noticeable thing being how little it fit in with the theming. The off-white building was little more than a blank square trying to hide in the background, with nothing of interest except a Rambley head power symbol fading on the wall. Maybe that was the building that controlled the power for this portion of the park? Maybe it hid stairs leading to the security office underground.

“Hey, that building,” Ed pointed out to Salem. “Is that where the-?”

“You ain’t goin’ in there,” Salem shot down.

“Okay.” Ed quirked a brow. “But is it?”

“It’s nothin’.”

Alright, so no answers from them. Odds were that was the heart of Spoiled Swamp. He’d have to remember that in case of an emergency.

Laura took another picture.

“Ah-ah! Delete,” Salem said.

“Okay, but I get a souvenir to take home.”

“Ya blackmailing me, Girlie?”

“Maaybe,” Laura teased.

“Heh, I knew I liked ya for a reason. Deal. Delete.”

Laura did. Then they continued along.

Salem seemed to have gotten bored of playing the role of tour guide as they fell largely silent as they led them around, save a quip here or there. And allowing Laura to take a pair of black and white striped shades with little skunk ears on them from the unfortunately moist and mostly emptied gift shop.

“How do they look?” Laura asked.

“Better on me,” Salem countered. “But not half bad.”

Laura scoffed a little and got out her phone again to take a selfie, then gave them a challenging look. “I’ll delete it for a second pair.”

“What’s this, a shakedown? You can keep it, but don’t go tellin’ anyone who ya got ‘em from.”

“Deal!”

Salem knew that all they were doing was encouraging her. She’d become a lot bolder with this tit-for-tat banter and all that was going to do was make her think they were chummy. Salem didn’t

make friends, not when all their old ‘pals’ were either dead or dormant. Or ditched while they had the chance. You couldn’t get close to anybody, especially not a human.

It was just because she helped out. Salem wasn’t stupid, but they weren’t ungrateful either. Both of these- albeit very odd- humans had earned a little effort for their efforts.

But they DID loop back to the diner soon afterwards. They were done walking around, and apparently so were Ed and Laura after Laura nearly twisted her ankle walking over uneven bricks in pumps and Ed took a wrong step over some stones and got a soggy right shoe because of it. Yup, the diner was a welcome sight.

“Home again,” Salem announced.

“Thanks for taking us around-,” Laura began, and was quickly interrupted.

“Tour’s not over. Come on in.”

Salem led around the back. Ed and Laura exchanged a somewhat confused look. Laura shrugged and followed first with Ed behind, catching up and walking inside.

Salem led them through the kitchen, around the counter, and into the center of the diner by the booths.

“Tour’s over.”

Laura and Ed both looked confused, but as Salem spun on their heel to face them Ed had a sinking feeling about what was coming.

“And since I walked ya all ‘round this lovely little slice of my territory, seems only fair that I get somethin’ in return for my troubles,” they remarked.

Laura looked mildly surprised. Then furrowed her brows and pursed her lips, as though betrayed, and began digging into her purse.

“I’ve got a pack of gum and biscuits. Unless you’re wanting cash for some reason,” she said, clearly annoyed by the bait and switch.

“Not you,” Salem said. They stepped to her side and eyed Ed. “I need that disk you swiped from Rambley. He wants it back.”

Mollie’s disc, Ed pieced together quickly. Of course he had been watching him then. Of course he would want her back.

“I can’t do that, Salem. I’m sorry. You can blame it on me, tell Rambley I wouldn’t give it up, but I can’t.”

“Sure, ya can!” Salem stepped forward and swung an arm around his shoulders. “And you will, or else we’re gonna have some problems. You, me, and whichever Rambley’s in the room.”

“No, I’m not,” Ed said more firmly. “Why does he even want it? It was just sitting in a file cabinet!”

“Prob’ly cause ya took it,” Salem said bluntly.
Unphased.

“Don’t you even know what it is?!”

“Some footage of the docs splitting atoms and
poking rats.”

“That disc is Mollie’s backup disc! That’s her! Or
what’s left of her. We can’t just give it back to
Rambley. I know she’s his best friend too, he IS the
first Rambley, but if she’s just going to sit in a file
cabinet... We have a chance to bring her back. We
can boot her up and wake her up, maybe even in a
new body!”

Salem pulled back suddenly with a look of
uncharacteristic befuddlement. “What?”

“That’s the whole reason I went in there in the first
place, to find Mollie.”

Salem stared at him for a long second, their face
unreadable.

Then they burst out laughing.

“Oh, of course! COURSE that’s it!” Salem cackled. They turned and started to head over towards their bed. “Grabbin’ up random junk- guess he’s the trash bandit for a reason! HA, actual trash bandit here! Ah, I hate that Fuzzface ain’t here to hear this. I’d love to see the look on his face.”

“What? What’s wrong with trying to bring Mollie back?” Laura asked defensively. “At least they’re trying!”

“There’s nothin’ wrong with it. Ehhh, well there’s one thing.”

This was punctuated with a pause as they dug for something in their stuff and uncovered a small, but heavy-duty safe. They quickly put the combination in before they could see, even shielding themselves with their tail as Ed walked up and then presenting what was hidden inside on their hand like a platter.

“This thing.”

The thing in question looked like a clear box with multiple discs suspended inside. Connected to something on one side that looked like a disc reader but nothing that Ed had ever seen before. There was a bundle of cords too, but only on the inside. Half of the box was a black plastic that looked like it had to be connected with some sort of outside port.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“A real backup,” Salem said smugly.

“...What?”

That’s as long as the dam held. Salem burst into laughter again.

“That wasn’t a backup! Criminy, you’d think Rambley would know that! HA! Sheez!” they said. “Ya just nicked some random CD with testing videos on it! It ain’t worth salt!”

Oh.

Okay, that explained a few things. Including why it looked like a random CD. This was giving more backup vibes.

“...Okay, sure. You can have the disc back.”

“Great! Glad ya see it my way.” Salem started to return the disk to the safe.

“Wait!” Ed shouted. They did. “I meant for the backup, as a trade.”

“Ugh, of course you did,” Salem said tiredly.

“Is it Mollie’s?”

“Who knows! Might be her. Might be Finley! Might be Lloyd,” Salem said cheekily. “It’s a gamble. BUT I need that disc back before I even consider lettin’ you even touch this one.”

Ed watched as Salem stuck the backup back into the safe and locked it tightly. He knew better than to fight for it, but it was hard letting it go.

“I’ll get it to you. I can bring it back today,” Ed promised.

“Nah, I’m sleepin’ as soon as you leave. Just get it back to me whenever.” Whenever they weren’t sleeping, apparently. “BUT lemme warn ya ‘bout somethin’ that I know he ain’t thinkin’ about.”

“What’s that?”

“This. All’a this.” Salem spread out their arms. “The park’s crashin’ in on itself. Power’s not guaranteed. The generators won’t last forever, except at the labs. There’s nothin’ here to live for except for surviving. What’s the point of bringin’ back another one of us just to live like this? Hell, it ain’t livin’ if you’re stuck in a screen.”

“Wait, you were stuck on a screen too?” Laura asked in surprise. “Okay, that kinda makes sense.”

“Eh, can’t remember, doesn’t matter. I don’t have a backup as far as I know. It was only for the big moneymakers. And Finley.” Salem grew more serious. “I know what Rambley’s thinking but bringing them back ain’t the same as savin’ them.”

“But what if she had a body?” Ed offered. “What if we can keep the generators going and fix up the park a little? I don’t mean to reopen, but so that living isn’t just surviving.”

“You have a go at that on his side of the park. I’m fine here,” Salem dismissed. “As fer a body, even if ya get Rambley on board, and I mean the one that IS the current board a’ directors, what’s the chance of you findin’ a Mollie body that ain’t shot? We went through more birds than napkins here. They never lasted.”

“There’s got to be one down there. Besides... Rambley invited me back anytime.”

Salem looked surprised for a second, then got a flat look. “Course he did... Well, whatever. But don’t go taking anything ya can’t pay back. He might be actin’ friendly now, but he’s stabbed his pals in the back before.”

“I know... It was Lloyd, right? During a performance he attacked him? I saw footage of it,” Ed said.

And... That was footage that the Other Rambley likely placed for him, he now realized.

Suddenly going to go seek him out didn’t seem so smart.

And suddenly it also seemed like a much more likely possibility that he would get stuck going back.

“Yeah, that was him all right. All it took was one bite to spread it all over,” Salem muttered. They noticed the weird, spacey look Ed had gotten. “...Hello?”

Ed snapped out of it. “Sorry, just-.”

“Whatever. I get it.”

Salem stood back up and crossed their arms.

“Now get outta here. I’ve entertained ya enough.”

“Got it,” Ed said. He didn’t need to be told twice.

“Please actually lay down. You need the rest,” Laura encouraged.

“Ha! You’re sayin’ that after you ran me all over the swamp?”

“You offered!”

“Ah, get outta here.”

“I’m going! But keep an eye on any symptoms getting worse, okay?”

Salem shrugged it off and Laura followed Ed out, giving them a wave as she headed into the kitchen. She didn’t seem too eager to leave; probably worried

her patient would suddenly decline. But nah, Salem knew it was all good.

They considered telling her to come back sometime.

Eh, no point. She'd be back.

They were no better than the Rambleys, they realized. They shoved the thought aside easily and crashed into bed, welcoming the darkness of sleep for as long as they could get it.

...

Rambley was half asleep on the couch. His head propped up by his arm that was resting on the armrest, his eyes closed, and his other hand holding a half-eaten pickle stuck at the end of a fork.

At the sound of the door opening his head shot up and he looked over with alarm, as though Lloyd himself had a chance of walking through. As soon as he saw Ed he got a brilliant smile.

“Welcome home, Eddie!” he chirped. He turned to lean forward on the armrest, stealthily hiding the pickle behind him. “Laura didn’t come with you?”

“No, she wanted to head home and take a shower. She said she’d swing by later though,” Ed said.

He tiredly dropped his backpack by the door and kicked off his shoes, then took off his wet and dry socks and balled them up to wash later.

Rambley moved to the other side of the couch and patted for him to sit down beside him. Ed all but collapsed on it. He got a few seconds to relax before straightening back up.

“So, I’ve got good news and bad news,” he said.

“Oh, geez. The fact there’s bad news at all is bad news.” Rambley hummed pensively. “Mmm, I want the good news first.”

“Good news: I think we found Mollie’s backup disc!

A moment of silence hung over the room.

Rambley furrowed his brows at Ed. He opened his mouth and closed it, pausing. Then he sent a scrutinizing look at the disc sitting on the pillow beside him.

“...Please tell me I haven’t been getting all cozy with a random CD that is, in fact, not Mollie.”

“...If it makes you feel any better, it’s probably footage of Mollie.”

Rambley promptly slapped a hand over his own face in sheer embarrassment.

Of course, of course. It was bad enough that she couldn’t even hear him- it wasn’t even her!

It was just a random CD! Meanwhile, her backup...

He suddenly pulled his hand away. “Wait... But you found her? Where is she?” He looked over towards Ed’s bag, knowing he wouldn’t have carelessly

dumped her on the floor, and then back to him.
“...Don’t tell me she’s with Salem.”

“She’s... with Salem. Yeah.”

The hand went right back over his face.

“But it’s okay! Salem’s been keeping her stored in a safe at their place and I think we might be able to convince them to give her up.”

“And how do you suppose that?” Rambley mumbled into his palm.

“I just have a feeling. They didn’t give me a no, they just warned me about the risk, and Salem’s not the type to not just shoot me down.”

Rambley processed that and silently agreed. Salem was too blunt to beat around the bush, but they were also sneaky. They could be plotting something...

“What do they want for her?” he asked.

“They want that disc back. Or the other yo- the other Rambley wants it back. He saw me take it and I don’t know, maybe he wants to try and lure me back there.”

Another long pause.

Then Rambley finally looked up, an solemnly serious look on his face.

“Are you sure it’s the backup disc?”

“I think so. It looks different; it’s like a clear box with multiple CDs in it, about this big by this big.” He measured it with his hands. “And it looks like it can plug into a console. If there’s a whole person being stored on a drive, it’s got to be in something like that.”

Rambley hummed again and looked forward.
Processing what he said.

He was right, of course. It was silly to think that a whole personality could be stored on one little disc.

Silly Rambley! You should've known that! Well, guess now he knew why he didn't...

It all made sense, but it seemed too easy too. Salem just happened to have Mollie and just happened to be willing to give her up, and this just happened to be a useless disc that the other him just happened to want.

Rambley tapped his fingers on his cheek while his eyes darted around thoughtfully.

"What's their angle then...?" he asked under his breath.

"Salem or both of them?"

Rambley seemed to suddenly realize that Ed was clearly listening.

"...Nothing! Just thinking out loud," he brushed off.

Ed didn't. "I think Salem's protecting her, and I really think the Other Rambley's trying to get some sort of upper hand to get me back there."

"You're right about that one. I don't like how he looked at you..." Rambley said lowly.

Ed caught that shift in tone, but before he could say a thing it shifted right in the other directly.

"Well, I trust your judgement! If you think we should go for it, then let Salem have this CD. It's no good to me anyways if Mollie's not on it. BUT we have to get Mollie back in return. This might be our only bargaining chip!" Rambley picked up and waved the disc between them. "And if that Evil Rambley gets it... Gosh, I don't even want to imagine what he could do."

"Some really evil stuff, I bet."

"Don't mock me, Eddie. You saw how nutty that other me got down there," Rambley tsked, waving the forked pickle at him.

Ed quirked a brow at the pickle. Rambley gave an approving hum and bobbed it aside, gesturing with it as he continued.

“We can’t let that happen. We will have to keep our eyes and ears out and make absolutely sure he doesn’t get an upper hand on us.”

“Agreed.”

“Now that being said, this... this is great news!”
Rambley regained his smile in full. “So, we don’t have Mollie yet. Big deal! We know where she is and we know she’s safe, that’s all that matters! AND we’re working to get her back! That’s progress in my book!”

Rambley might’ve been putting on a bit of a front, but he at least did seem genuinely relieved to find Mollie. Maybe he had some hidden doubts about the CD too.

Or maybe he just wanted to lighten the mood, which was why he sat down the CD and picked up the remote.

“Now how would you like to watch an awful Lloyd movie and laugh at his expense?” Rambley asked.

“Which one?”

“Does it matter?” Rambley smirked. “It’s about Lloyd becoming some big actor or whatever.”

“I thought he was a big actor.”

“He’s a big actor in a small pond. Let’s watch Hollywood tear him apart!”

He started to scroll to put it on when he hesitated.

“But just one thing...” he said, his voice dipping. He looked up at him with a look of dread. “Be honest with me Eddie... You didn’t tell them I was talking to the CD, did you?”

“No. Promise.”

“Oh, good! That is something I wouldn’t have lived down!” Rambley said with an awkward chuckle.

“Let’s just keep that little fun fact between us, hmm?”

“Sure thing, Buddy,” Ed said with a smile.

Then he settled in for the movie, putting aside any worries for the time being and reveling in the fact that he could sink into his own couch and still have Rambley with him.

Maybe someday Mollie would join them.

...

Streaming was a good way to clear Ed’s mind. When he was focusing on work, and the performance of it, he wasn’t thinking about anything else. He had a lot on his mind recently and sometimes a few dumb games could clear that all out.

“We’re going to start with a Late Night Terrorizer fangame, Thursday Night Gobbler. I’ve heard... Things. Eh, not bad things, just things. Here’s the game page.”

He showed it on screen. They caught sight of the turkey on the cover and the chat began filling up with notable marks on the monster’s hideous face and... blatantly supple curves.

Ed grinned to himself as he read over the reaction from the chat on his second monitor. Nobody certain whether the parody was entirely intentional or someone’s particular interests.

“Now, I know what you’re thinking, chat. I know the turkey’s looking a little spooky, but I think we can get through it together. We got through Two Weekends at Benson’s, we can get through this.”

He saw a comment about the scary-sexy turkey’s broken walk cycle on the download page and was insanely curious to see how it was going to look in-game.

But right before he could start the game, he was interrupted by a ding and a popup from his Belay antivirus software.

A warning about a virus? Maybe he picked something up from the game, or more likely it flagged the game on accident.

“Juuuust one second, guys.”

He clicked on the popup to pull it up, it not being visible to the viewers, and checked what it said. Only to find a very familiar name waiting in an unexpected place.

Threat detected: R.org.2AdminPerm -then a stream of numbers and symbols that weren't entirely important.

...What? Was that... Was that Ramsey?

Ed stared at the popup for a long second and then, going on his gut instinct, he allowed it. There weren't

any immediate changes, he just x'd out the popup and continued with beginning the stream.

It wasn't until about ten minutes later that something came of it. When he was hiding in a closet waiting for a patrolling turkey to pass by so that he could grab the last fuse to open a garage door to escape. He was deep in one of the dumbest games he had played that month and determined to get it on the third go.

It wasn't necessarily a hard game. It was just a little buggy and a little cheap, which made for an entertaining watch but a much less enjoyable play.

When all of a sudden, he got a Super Clap- a small donation and a highlighted comment. Well, he had gotten a few by then but this one was notably different. The automated voice read it out.

"TheRealRambley says: Hi Ensign! I'm your biggest fan! I can't wait to see what else you play tonight. Maybe you could play more Step Up please?"

That was Rambley. There was zero chance that wasn't Rambley. From the way he typed that out-how did he type it? -to the naming, to the random virus.

He was doing it, but how? It had to be the 'virus'. That had to be him connecting with the computer.

The weirdest part was that he swore Rambley was asleep. He had went to try and take a nap after Laura left and the last Ed saw of him, he glanced into his room and saw a striped puff ball curled up on the bed. He assumed he was asleep, but maybe he wasn't? Maybe he woke him up?

It could've been a friend of his pranking him, but nah, he was pretty certain this was, in fact, the real Rambley.

"Hey, Rambley! Thanks for the Super Clap! Yeah, I'm a bit of a fan myself," Ed said. Mentally reminding himself to not be weird, not sound weird. "Yeah, we could do some Step Up. I've got one more after this that I want to check out, then we'll do about

an hour of it. Unless I get stuck in the hole again. I go anywhere near that hole and I'm tapping out."

He felt awkward. It almost threw him off, but not in a bad way. It was almost like talking in code, hiding a little secret right in front of all of his viewers who would be none-the-wiser to what was up. Even if they knew they wouldn't believe it.

But suddenly Ed was feeling a lot more eager to tackle the rest of the game. With his pal on his side, he could-

"TheRealRambley says: Don't tickle the turkey winko face emoji."

...Oh. Oh no.

Ed decidedly didn't look at chat immediately after that comment came up. He didn't have to; he had a hunch of what was about to happen. He could see the comments moving a lot faster out of the corner of his eye.

Turns out his little buddy was going to be a big instigator.

Somehow that felt entirely in-character. It had been a few days since Rambley had gotten to Ed's apartment and so far so good! Things had been great. Well, save the fact that Rambley was feeling quite restless. Like he was supposed to be doing something.

Maybe it was because he felt so displaced. It wasn't that he didn't feel welcome, Ed had made him right at home, but there was a constant antsy sensation. A worry about Indigo Park, a fear of being spotted, of something happening to Mollie's backup disc while with Salem, a constant creeping thought that why he was gone somehow that other Rambley would sidle in and take over everything he knew and loved-

But that was silly! He was just worrying because he was bored, and because of that he spent a lot of time trying to distract himself. Ed helped a lot with that, seemingly more than happy to have a roommate.

Currently he was teaching Rambley how to play one of his games. It certainly wasn't Rambley's type of game, involving guns and shooting at mutated zombie people out to clobber the main character, but he wasn't about to be a stickler on family-friendly stuff. He was on vacation!

He wasn't even at the park! He could indulge, and boy oh boy, did it make him feel like he was breaking the rules. And he was enjoying every minute of it—well, he would be if he wasn't currently being swarmed.

“How is he still trying to bite me?! I've shot him exactly fifteen times already!”

“You've got to shoot the heads,” Ed said.

“I would if I could, but my aiming's whipping around like a willow tree in a hailstorm! This is not a good sign for the survival of mankind.”

Ed snickered and Rambley grinned to himself, even though he was now entirely backed into a corner.

That was when they were interrupted by the sound of Ed's phone buzzing from the side table where it was charging.

"Probably Laura," Ed said. He leaned over and grabbed it and checked the text. "Huh, or maybe not."

Katie: R U home?

"Weird."

"Who is it?" Rambley asked, slightly concerned.

"Just Katie. You remember her from when she visited the park? Just asking if I'm home." Ed quickly texted back an affirmative and brought his phone over to the couch in case she answered the "Why?" at the end.

“Oh yeah, Miss Spandex. Sweet gal! A little quiet, but- Oh, come on! Get off of me!”

What followed was a furious battle of button smashing before the game over screen popped up and Rambley’s ears dropped down. He looked thoroughly unamused.

He dropped the controller on the couch beside him and fell back with his arms crossed. “That’s it, I’m taking a break.”

“Suit yourself! Guess I’m just going to have to save the world on my own,” Ed teased, picking up the controller.

It was sort of obvious that he had wanted to play. He grabbed that controller up just a little too eagerly.

Not that Rambley would complain. In the case of this particular game, he would probably have more fun watching.

It was a little cool in the room. A quick check online showed that there was a cooling trend leading into December. Maybe there'd even be snow! As much as he loved his comfort, Rambley LOVED snow.

Though he supposed he would have to go home to enjoy it. It wasn't like he could go out and roll in the snow in the boxed in backyard behind Ed's apartment building without being seen...

But that didn't mean they couldn't do something festive! That was one of the things they talked about, sharing a nice Christmas together. Now he could do all the stuff he always dreamed of doing, like stuff he saw in the Christmas themed cartoons! Making gingerbread cookies, decorating a tree, putting up a mistletoe- and not smooching a pink raccoon underneath it.

Could he ask Ed if he wanted to cuddle up with a blanket and a mug of cocoa, or was that too bold? He must've crossed that bridge with the little kiss on the head. Couldn't get much bolder than that.

But he couldn't tell with Ed. Ed was really nice, and he was a really loyal friend. He could just be being friendly to Rambley, his little buddy. He could see him like a pet or something...

Gosh, Rambley really hoped he didn't see him as a pet. Especially now that he was living here and couldn't provide the same perks as he could at the park.

Well, all the more reason to prove that he wasn't! So, he waited a few minutes, let Ed play a little longer, and then he took the plunge.

"Hey, Eddie. Do you have any cocoa?" he asked.

"Yeah, I think so. Want me to make some?"

Nope! Only a mooch would ask for him to make the treat. Rambley was short, not helpless.

"No, no. I've got it! Remember, I'm an expert at heating up water," Rambley said with a little chuckle. "But the reason I'm asking is because I just noticed

that it's getting on the end of November and Thanksgiving is behind us, and I'm thinking it's about time to start getting in the festive mood. We could cuddle up and watch a Christmas movie together! Sure, it's a little early in the afternoon, by whaddya say?"

He really, really hoped it wasn't a funny look and a gentle shutdown.

And it wasn't! He got a smile and a, "Sounds good to me! Need me to get anything?"

"Mmmaybe you could go get a big blanket?"
Rambley suggested slyly.

Ed held up the blanket from the back of the couch, which he had been sleeping with.

"Bigger than that."

A thumbs up and Ed got up to go get it, setting the controller down on the coffee table and switching the television input from the game- leaving it on pause

for later. Rambley hopped up and headed into the kitchen.

“It’s in the pantry in the back left! There’s some marshmallows too, but they’re kind of old. They might be stale,” Ed called as he headed into the hallway.

Rambley waved him off. “They’ll be fine! Marshmallows are too fun to go stale!”

He could tell from experience that a marshmallow could be years after date and still be pretty tasty. But he knew he could be biased.

The pantry shelves only started about halfway up, with random cleaning stuff stored in the space on the bottom. Rambley had easy reach of the second shelf and pushed boxes around before he found the hot chocolate shoved in the back alongside a box of hot apple cider packets.

“Ooo, now there’s something I haven’t tried!”

Rambley said. He pulled it out and checked the back to see if it was as easy to make as the hot chocolate.

When he suddenly heard voices. His ears pricking and lifting as he listened to a group of people come up the stairs outside the front door, which was located directly behind him. They were chattering away so it wasn’t anything to be worried about, but Rambley couldn’t help but get antsy when he was so close to the windows, even if they were mostly covered and out of angle.

It was no big deal.

Until the group stopped outside and started knocking. Someone ringing the doorbell as they did.

Understandably, Rambley’s first reaction was immediate panic. Trapped on the other side of the door between two windows that now seemed to have the flimsiest blinds of all time covering them. If he walked past, surely someone would see him

through a crack with his overly fluffy body and colorful fur.

So, he did the only thing he could think of.

He pulled into the pantry and hastily shut it behind him.

Meanwhile, Ed was getting the blankets out of his bedroom when he heard the knocking- a moment late since they started spamming the doorbell when he didn't immediately answer. He hustled in, correctly assuming it had to be Katie considering she had just sent that message. He quickly scanned for Rambley, checking the kitchen to make sure he wasn't hiding in there.

But he wasn't. Where was Rambley? Ed looked around quickly. Had he somehow slipped past the bedroom door while Ed was inside? He must've, because he wasn't here.

Well, he wasn't in the kitchen. That was good. Taking that as an assurance, Ed answered the door.

He was greeted by a group of his friends. Katie and Daryl, Marv and Kelly, Sean was in the back and it looked like Leo was there too, and AJ; in total, seven of them. It was almost weird to see Laura not with them too.

But of course Laura wouldn't be with them, because she was busy with school today. And of course Laura wouldn't be with them, because she would've never invited SEVEN of their friends to his apartment.

Normally he would've welcomed them in happy to hangout, but right now he felt like a deer in headlights.

"Hiii! Sorry it was such short notice, but we wanted to surprise you. We haven't hung out since Halloween, and that was, uh... Well, the cops..." Katie trailed off as she stepped in and hugged him and unfortunately signaled the others to follow inside.

“Ey, what’s up?” Daryl asked.

“Nothing!... Much,” Ed said stiltedly. “Not much. Yeah, sure, let’s hang. But there’s not really much to do here. We can go out?”

“Maybe we could stay in? It’s freezing outside,” Kelly suggested.

“It is. Very chilly!” Katie agreed, feigning a little shiver. She must’ve picked up on something. “We won’t stay long! Sorry we sort of dropped in...”

To which Ed instantly snapped himself out of it. “No, stay! I just meant because the living room’s small.”

“I’m fine sitting on the floor. Hey!” Marv said, snapping his fingers and pointing at him. “You still got that beanbag?”

“Yeah, I’ll go grab it! There’s chips on top of the fridge too. Help yourself.”

The lanky guy walked into the kitchen to do so while the others headed into the living room. Ed took a deep, steadying breath. He knew he was living dangerously but he couldn't muster up the gumption to even suggest for his friends to leave. Even if some of them were more acquaintances than anything.

Especially with it being all of them. They must've been planning this, because he had trouble believing that everybody had Sunday off. He could manage it; all he had to do was keep the doors shut and keep them in the living room. They wouldn't wander into his office or bedroom.

Unfortunately, Rambley wasn't in either of those safe locations. Instead, he was standing in the pantry chewing at his nails as he listened to Marv bumble around the kitchen grabbing up numerous chip bags.

"Go on, go on, don't look in here!" Rambley thought.

Marv approached the door. Rambley held his breath... and the man continued by into the kitchen.

“Phew! That was a close one...”

But he was far from out of the woods. In fact, he was as deep in the woods if you counted each visitor as a tree.

He had his tail wrapped around him and held tightly. Almost as though to hide in it and maybe in a subconscious way that’s what he was trying to do, but more so it was so that it didn’t bump anything on the shelf.

He couldn’t really stay here all day, could he? Eventually someone would come too close or hear him and that door would open and expose him to everyone. But what was the alternative? There wasn’t any way out.

Rambley still began to look around to at least see if there was somewhere to hide when his eyes fixed upon a square hidden on the ceiling of the pantry. Attic access! Or at least access to a crawlspace.

Now crawlspaces weren't exactly the cleanest places in the world, but he would take dust and the occasional spider over the risk of being seen.

Besides, he was a raccoon! They were supposed to like hidden cubbies, like his basement. Maybe he'd discover the cozy warmth of, uh... a dark hole in the ceiling. It could be worse!

Taking a deep breath to steady himself, Rambley set the boxes on the shelf and rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"How to get up there... Hmm...?" He felt the shelf and then shook his head. "Maybe, but I don't know. Hmm... Maybe if I stretched out, could I...? Yeah, I could reach. Easy!"

And that was to use the wall and the shelves and carefully climb up, trying to balance his weight enough to not accidentally pull a shelf down with him. It could be risky, but he had to try.

He pressed his palm and a foot against the small section of wall beside the door, one hand against the

shelves, and a foot against the wall between them. It wouldn't be a tall climb considering that Rambley wasn't THAT short, but he had to be very careful. Slow and steady, he started to lift himself up and grit his teeth when the shelf made a funny noise.

He climbed up a little higher, slowly inching towards the ceiling, almost within reach when he heard footsteps approaching. His pulse started to quicken as he heard voices and Ed and couldn't differentiate who was coming closer. He tried to carefully climb up higher, reaching up to the next shelf and pulling himself further-

When suddenly the shelf collapsed with an enormous clatter. It landed directly on the shelf beneath it, as did Rambley's hand, but a lot of the food stuff cluttering it tipped over and fell to the floor.

Rambley stared with wide eyes.

And then threw caution to the wind and hastily, and frantically, but still quietly climbed his way up to the crawlspace. He pushed up the cover and started to

climb in, feeling terror grip his throat as the door opened right as he was halfway through. He pulled himself inside, thumped his head on the low roof, and scrambled out of the way.

He looked back at the opening with fear, knowing he had been seen.

And then breathing a huge sigh of relief when he heard who it was.

“What happened?” one of the girls called from the living room.

“Nothing! My shelf just fell,” Ed called back.

See, Ed had decided to check on Rambley while getting the beanbag stashed away in his office. Except he went in there and there was no Rambley, and suddenly the list of options for where he could be narrowed down dramatically, especially once he pulled back the shower curtain and found the bathtub empty too.

So, he was on his way back just in time to hear the crash, race over, and see half of Rambley squeezing up into the tight crawlspace between his apartment and the one above it.

All things considered, he kept his cool pretty well.

“How’d that happen?” AJ asked.

Ed sort of shrugged as Leo came over to look inside. Seeing the supposed evidence of an empty pantry with a broken shelf and cans on the floor.

“Who knows. Stuff happens.”

“Yeah, all that stuff you had stacked up on it happened. Looks like you’re preparing for Z-day in here!” Leo remarked.

“I wish. At least I’d unload some of this stuff. I’d be rich. Rich!” He started to pick the stuff up and handed Leo a can of sliced jalapenos. “Hey, hand these to Marv.”

Leo headed into the living room holding up the can.
“Hey, Marv-.”

As soon as he was around the corner, Ed stepped into the pantry and pulled one of the doors closed. He whispered up behind his hand. “Hey!”

“Mm-mm!” Rambley hummed negatively. He peeked over the hole, shaking his head wildly and making some sort of communicative gesture with his hands.

Though whatever he was trying to say with the slicing and pointing wasn’t making it through. Ed lifted his hand in a half-shrug, and Rambley rolled his eyes and waved him off before disappearing inside the crawlspace and pushing the cover back on.

Ed was going to take that as a: “I’m fine! Don’t worry about me, worry about them!”

Which it was. Rambley was breathing easy in that stuffy little gap. He was more than happy with hiding up here if it meant being safe and unspotted.

...But he couldn't help but be a little bored. He couldn't even hear the conversation downstairs, and this crawlspace wasn't much to write home about. He looked around to see if there was anything else in there except the assumed spiders.

Oh! Hello, what was this? Light was coming from nearby, in the direction of where the back of the apartment would be.

Curious, Rambley belly-crawled over there, around the ducts and far from the numerous bunches of wiring that circulated through the building. Ugh, he wasn't even a licensed electrician and he noticed something funny about the wiring up here. And caked in all this dust?! It was a fire waiting to happen!

"Mental note: clean this place OUT."

But certainly not now and not without a pair of sturdy electrical gloves. Another thing he should've brought from the park.

He made his way over to the wooden slated cover on the wall and gave it a tentative push. It was loose, not even secured very well, and all it took was a little fiddling with his claws and working to push it out. He barely caught the cover before it could fall and then pulled it back inside, struggling to fit it through before getting it inside. Then he could peek outside.

The opening looked out above one of Ed's bedroom windows and stared out the back of the building. Far below was the small, boxed in backyards of the first floor apartments. One of them with a neat garden, one with a plastic slide and some random toys, and the third entirely barren but neatly cut. Past them was a backroad partially hidden by the tall fence, then a sloping hill leading up to a thick tree line. Since most of the leaves were already gone he could see a building through them, but not much of it.

The wind on his face felt nice, if a little chilly. It had been a few days since he had been outside, and it was a literal breath of fresh air from the stuffy attic. It

helped that from this vantage point and angle he didn't see anyone. He wasn't entirely safe, but it was pretty secluded back here, so he could peek out a little more.

Yup! Nobody down below. Nobody even in the distance! He was alone, up in this tight little nook in the building.

...

...

"I wonder if I could get down to the window from here..."

He had opened the window the other night to peek out and was sure he hadn't relocked it, so unless Ed did it would be an easy way into the house. But it would also be EXTREMELY risky.

"And extremely insane too! What am I thinking?! I can't go climbing down a wall in broad daylight! Someone's definitely going to see!"

It would've been very timely for someone to start driving by right then to remind him of the risk. But no. It was remarkably quiet today. The only cars he did hear were going by on the other side of the building, and not even too close to it. It was completely deserted.

...Could he pull it off? It would be a risky maneuver, but there wasn't anyone back here. If he did it- It was a simple plan. Squeeze out of the crawlspace, drop down to the window, hop to the next, and let himself in. Then lounge on the bed until Ed's buddies left and THEN spend a good hour or so combing dust out of his fur.

At least it would be more dignified than hiding up here like some sort of... Well, raccoon.

But he WAS a raccoon. And raccoons were notorious for what? Sneaking around, climbing buildings, and breaking and entering. He was the best guy for the job really!

You know what? If nobody showed up in thirty seconds then maybe he'd go for it, if just to get out of this stuffy attic.

...And nobody showed up.

And for some reason, whether it be curiosity or the need to be in control of some aspect of his life, Rambley went for it. He began to climb through the tight space, contorting his body best he could to squeeze past.

"Come on, come on. You're built for this, Buddy! You're packed chock full of dozens of home-grown cells plumped up with raccoon DNA! It's in your blood, it's in your bones... Ugh, not in my back though. Hang on." He twisted himself and slid through. "Okay, better."

But he was pretty exposed now. He would have to make this quick.

"Here goes nothing...!"

He pulled himself out and dropped, catching onto the window ledge and quickly pulling his legs and tail in to keep himself less noticeable. He partially pulled himself up and tried at the window. No good, but worth a shot- the other one was the one that had been opened.

Pulling himself up to stand on the window ledge was difficult because he was taller than the window, naturally, meaning holding onto it was a lot more awkward. He had to lean backwards while not leaning backwards far enough to fall- yet somehow, he found that he was keeping his balance.

Huh. Maybe all that raccoon DNA stuff wasn't just bluffing to get himself unstuck.

He stepped to the end of the window, one foot staying on the ledge as he held onto the corner and prepared himself to jump. He didn't dare look down-

Until he did.

...Actually, wasn't that far of a fall, but it would definitely guarantee that he would find himself hiding under Ed's car with likely a broken arm until Ed came to found him.

With that humiliating possibility and the fear of being spotted pushing him, he hopped for the next window. His foot missed but his hands caught and he hastily pulled himself up. He almost lost his balance trying to push the window open but was able to catch onto it as he opened it up a crack and held as he got it up enough to squeeze inside.

He almost fell face first onto the carpet but just managed to catch onto the bed's blanket and then slowly slid to the floor. Still landing on his face but at least without making enough noise to alert the guests in the next room. He got up quickly and looked outside of the window, searching to see if anyone had spotted him- but no. Not a soul in sight.

“*Phew!* Close call...” he mumbled. He pulled the window closed to a crack, not wanting to risk the noise of shutting it.

But what a rush! There was a sort of giddy excitement bubbling in his chest. He wanted to run out right now to Ed and recite his feat, “Guess what I just did?! Scaled a building in broad daylight WITHOUT GETTING SEEN!” It felt amazing! Like he had just committed a robbery and got away with the jewels... Erm, that is, robbing a jewel thief and giving the jewels back to their rightful owners, of course.

But it was an incredible sensation! Turns out he was just as stealthy as he always imagined himself to be, he just never had a good time to practice it.

...

So, what now?

Well, now he was stuck in the bedroom. Better than the pantry at least, but not much to do. Unless he wanted to eavesdrop on Ed’s conversations with his guests. He supposed he might as well do so. After all, he was a guest too, and it wasn’t like this was supposed to be private. It was a bunch of people

eating chips in Ed's living room, not a homeland security meeting!

So, he sidled over and listened by the door. Behind the cracked door so he wouldn't be at any risk of being seen.

"How'd you not get arrested climbing up there? They caught me before I was even ten feet up and there was nobody there," someone said.

"What are you talking about? There were people all over the place!" one of the girls, maybe AJ? said.

"I went at night," Ed said nonchalantly. Then said a little more smugly, "And I didn't announce on Harmony that I was going before I got there."

"He's got you there," Leo added.

"Oh, yeah, okay. Like you didn't tell a bunch of people that you were going to sneak into Indigo Park a million times."

“Hey, the stream thinks I only went once. And I’m not going back anytime soon after the cop thing,” Ed countered.

“Even if I please, please asked you and promised it would just be the three of us?” Katie asked.

Wait a second, what had Rambley missed out on while in the crawlspace? Did she ask him to take her back? Either way, Ed shut it down.

“Maybe, but now’s not a good time. I’ve got to catch up on streaming.”

“You couldn’t pay me to go back there...” Leo mumbled.

“Too busy tickling the turkey?” Daryl asked Ed straight-faced.

“Shut up.”

Rambley chuckled to himself. Oh, he really should’ve felt bad about that, but it was just too fun

to watch the chat box run along with it. People were, in Rambley's opinion, mostly goofy at heart.

And these guys didn't sound so bad either! Even the ones he didn't recognize. Sounded like they were good friends with Ed, and they knew about Indigo Park! What he wouldn't give to be able to be a part of the conversation. Or at least, be able to watch them closer, like be in the actual room.

If only he could attach to Ed's TV and look through the screen, but he doubted there was a camera on it. He'd have to wait here.

Or...

What if he accidentally got spotted and they loved him as much as Laura did? And then he had more friends? A whole gang of friends?!

The excitement began to build in his chest.

They already knew about this security guard character that Ed had built up, so the transition

wouldn't be that shocking. And who wouldn't love him? He's adorable! He's so fluffy and designed to appeal to both kids and adults! He'd put on the ol' Indigo charm and wow them all with his computer tricks and deceptively stuffed animal-like body. Just like he did with Laura!

...Except... Laura... she did freak out a little when she first saw him, didn't she? It took her a while to calm down, and the only reason she really heard him out was because Ed was there.

Sure, Ed was here now, but gosh it was a lot more people. And he couldn't lock the doors manually so they would have to hear him out before running off. No, no, they could sprint right out into the street and start yelling- "Help! Help! There's a living RAMBLEY THE RACCOON in here!"

And then people would see him, and then they'd know about him, and then the police would arrest him, and- whaddya know- that's how he'd find himself getting dissected on a lab table by a bunch of scientists.

He couldn't risk it, and even if he could he wasn't sure if he could handle the fallout. If he was going to do that he should've just done it on Halloween, when he could've lied about being a remote controlled animatronic.

He sunk into himself with a silent sigh and adjusted his bandana. No, he had to stay hidden. Even if it meant not joining the party. Who was he kidding? It wouldn't be a party without him... Or with him.

But he couldn't want friends that badly. After all, he hadn't made any effort to get Mollie's backup. If he was so lonely, he should've demanded Ed take him back to the park pronto. He could've had her up and about by now- on the screen but still raring to go, just like good 'ol Mollie always was!

But he didn't. Because he was afraid. Not that it would fail, but that he would boot up his old friend only to find out- whoops! Nope, not your friend, Rambley! Or was that Other Rambley? Clone Rambley?

He could imagine it now: “Oh, Moll! It’s so good to see you!” he would say.

“Hi there! I’m Mollie Macaw! And who might you be?” she would ask.

“What? Mollie, it’s me! Your best friend, Rambley!”

“Sorry, little guy. You sure are sweet, but you’re not MY Rambley. Where is he? I want to see him!”

And then Salem would show up and say something like, “Sorry, Garbage Can, but I warned you. Ya might look like him, but yer no Rambley the Raccoon.”

His heart broke a little imagining that.

It always came back to that stupid real Rambley thing. He knew Ed was right, he knew there was no point in dwelling on it, but it was always waiting for him to lower his guard and creep up on him. Reminding him that any memories he had of his

friends were phony, that he convinced himself that he had friends when really he was just some robot that though he was Rambley in a fleshy body.

His whole life was a sham. Even his username was a lie! The Real Rambley, what a fraud!

“Oh, stop that! You can’t keep wallowing in this. It’s not productive at all, all it does is make you feel bad. Besides, it’s not like that OTHER Rambley is any more real than you are. I don’t recall Rambley the Raccoon being some kind of homicidal stalker, do you?... Y’know, maybe a lot of this could be fixed by me not talking to myself as much,” Rambley scolded himself.

For the moment it seemed to do the trick in getting him out of his head.

So, what now? He supposed he would just sit here listening to them talk and waiting for them to leave, lonely in Ed’s room, hoping to all goodness that nobody walked in. He supposed he could sit on the

floor on the other side of the bed just in case, or in the closet.

Or... maybe he could at least slip into Ed's office. Yeah! Why not? It would give him some distance, and he could also distract himself on the computer. And, AND, he could try out his sneakiness again!

He peeked out and could see some of the guests, including a guy on a beanbag with tall hair who he didn't recognize. None of them were looking in his direction right now. He quickly skirted into the hallway and then into the office, inwardly thanking Ed for leaving the door open. He quietly shut it behind him.

"Made it!" he cheered to himself. It didn't give him as much of a buzz- especially after that pity party in the bedroom- but it was just enough of a rush to get his act together.

So, now time to kill some of it! He couldn't eavesdrop as well, but he could still hear them in the living room. They weren't exactly the quietest bunch.

That would at least signal where they were as he went on the computer. Though he didn't want to get too comfortable, so he stayed standing as he did so.

And honestly, didn't do so long. He tried to web browse, but he kept becoming distracted by the door, eventually taking time to pace instead. He found himself pacing a lot, listening in and tuning out. Once someone passed by and made him very nervous, but they were just heading into the bathroom, and Rambley did his best to NOT listen in on what happened in there.

At one point the conversation changed along with him hearing a lot of movement and listening in he realized that they were getting ready to leave. He breathed a sigh of relief- maybe they could get back on track with the Christmas movie plans!... After he helped him clean the pantry of course.

"I'm starving. Can we swing by and get some Buenos Burritos?" Leo asked.

“Why don’t we just drive past a dumpster and pig out?” the girl, must’ve been Kelly asked.

“Heck yeah, I didn’t realize THAT was an option.”

“Ugh.”

“Ed, where do I put this?” Marv asked, shaking the beanbag.

“The office. Here, I’ve got it,” Ed said. There was the crinkling of foam beads as he took it.

“You want to come with us?” Katie offered.

“Where?”

“To the dumpster,” Daryl said.

“To the Buenos Burritos,” Katie corrected, sounding amused. “You don’t have to though. I know we sort of barged in...”

“I might take a raincheck-.”

“Here’s your chips,” Marv said. It sounded like he was handing over twenty bags.

“I’ve got it. They go in the pantry, right?” Leo asked.

“No!” Ed quickly introjected. He must’ve gotten a funny look. “I don’t put anything back in there until I check the shelves. Just put them on the- actually, here, let’s switch.” There was some crinkling.

“Maybe tomorrow?” Katie asked.

“Sure! I think I can pencil you in. I don’t know about Laura.”

“I’ll call and ask. But think about the Haunted House idea.”

Wait, wait. Hold up. What haunted house idea?

Rambley knew he must’ve been missing something earlier. When did a haunted house idea come into the picture? And why one after Halloween? Did that-

That better not have anything to do with them going to the park. Though, huh, now that he was thinking of it, that would line up perfectly with the bits of the conversation he had been hearing.

Rambley rubbed his chin suspiciously. It sounded an awful lot like somebody was interested in the 'three' of them, likely her Ed and Laura, heading back to Indigo Park and possibly exploring the Haunted Castle. Which was, of course, a big no-no both because Rambley was not on the system to protect them and because it was beside a warehouse loaded with crazed mutant bats.

Ed wasn't really considering taking her, was he? No way! He was just trying to be nice as he brushed her off. Keep it lowkey and inconspicuous.

But would she go on her own? Well, that was a trickier question to answer. She didn't seem as bold as Laura, but they had eagerly gone to the Halloween Party. And then they came over here without much warning at all!

There was no doubt about it, they would have to keep an eye out and a finger on the pulse of this situation... Something that would've been leagues easier if he was still in the park, but there wasn't much he could do about that without going back.

His thoughts were cut off by the sound of approaching footsteps. He backed away from the door and towards the closet, preparing to throw himself inside, even edging the door open slowly only for it to get caught on all the junk hiding inside. He began to panic.

But then the door opened and he saw the beanbag being shoved through. He relaxed, because he knew that it was Ed bringing his stuff back-

Until the beanbag was tossed aside and revealed Leo standing in the doorway. Him nonchalantly throwing it into the room before making total eye contact with Rambley. His eyes going wide.

Both froze up on the spot. Silently staring at one another in abject horror. Each one waiting for the other to make the first move.

Smooth it over, smooth it over, smooth it over...

Rambley got a big, strained smile and gave him a friendly little wave, his other arm tucked behind his back. "Hi! I'm-!"

The door slammed shut.

And Rambley promptly yanked open and dove into Ed's closet.

"No, no, no, no, no!" he mumbled to himself as he shut the door and tried to huddle behind the boxes. It didn't matter how far he sank into them, it wasn't enough.

He saw a sweater stuffed into a cardboard box and snatched it up and tried to cover himself with it. Unfortunately, it wasn't big enough and he wasn't

small enough to do much, but at least it was on his head.

Though he did spot a framed picture hiding in the box beneath it. Facing downward and covered up as though Ed had been hiding it. Rambley didn't think about it then though. He was more concerned with hiding himself.

His heart was pounding in his chest so hard that it hurt. He held a hand to it, trying to will it to calm down as he waited for footsteps. For someone to barge in and throw open the closet and see him, for the shouting to begin, for something! Something was coming and it was going to be terrible.

But surprisingly there was none. As frightened as he was of the approaching footsteps, they ended up heading in the bathroom, and nobody else came into the room to confront him. Maybe Leo hadn't told them yet...

But more seconds ticked by and there wasn't anything else. He uncovered his head in confusion.

“Did... Did he just leave and not tell anybody? Why wouldn't he tell anybody- Wait!” He pressed the sweater to his mouth in alarm, eyed wide. “He's the one who saw Lloyd! Or, no, didn't see him but HEARD him. He knew something was there, and now he's seen me too! Oh INDIGO, of all the people in the world, why the guy who already knew something sketchy was going on?! The Lloyd of the group- And how did I get seen in here when I didn't even get seen outside?! How could I be so stupid?!”

All the while he silently wrung at the sweater in his hands. Even going so far as to bite it with frustration to vent out those feelings. Eventually he calmed enough to listen against the wall.

From the closet, everything was much more muffled, but there certainly wasn't any screaming and wailing. There wasn't any whispering either, and Ed hadn't come back here, so... had Leo just not said anything? He couldn't be too sure. He could only continue waiting until someone came to get him, and he crossed his fingers and hoped it was Ed.

His eyes drifted back to the box he had uncovered. He reached inside for the framed picture and turned it over in his hands.

It never occurred to him that it might've been hidden until the moment he saw the picture. Now it being in a box, facedown, covered by a sweater seemed a lot more like a slap-dash attempt to conceal it.

Because it was a framed picture of Isaac Indigo. Rambley would recognize him anywhere. His visage was cast as a statue in the park. His face was saved in his memory banks in the back of his mind.

But it wasn't just Isaac Indigo. He was with someone, a man whom Rambley didn't recognize and in his panicked and away-from-the-park state didn't have the means to look him up. Isaac had his arm around him though, so maybe they were business partners. The other man was in a business suit while Isaac wore his typical faux-casual. A simple dress shirt, no tie.

Rambley turned over the picture trying to see if there was anything on the back that he had missed, but there wasn't.

Why did Ed have a framed picture of Isaac Indigo? And who was that man who stood next to him? It looked more like a picture that should've been mounted in Indigo's offices than here and it felt so out of place.

Maybe Ed swiped it while he was there? That was possible. There was a little dust on the top so maybe that was the case, and maybe he hid it because he was afraid Rambley would be upset at him stealing.

While Rambley might've been peeved at Ed snatching stuff without his express permission- save things he needed or souvenirs- stealing a picture was something entirely different. He wasn't even sure how to react to it; it just seemed weird. Did Ed really want a piece of Isaac memorabilia? Was he secretly like an Isaac fan? He certainly was an Indigo Park fan, so maybe.

Or... was it connected to the other man in the picture? Was he someone important or just a business associate? Could've been. Likely Isaac was the target of the picture snatching.

Temptation won over and he opened the back of the frame to check the photo directly. But no, no writing at all. No context. Just a picture of Isaac Indigo. Weird...

He was awfully tempted to ask Ed about it. Well, as soon as he figured out whether he was going to become a coonskin cap or not. With his amount of fur, he could probably make caps for everybody.

He sighed- he was doing that a lot recently- and set the picture back down in the box. He then pulled the sweater around his shoulders and began to comb down his fluffed up tail and waited.

Leo came down the hall and practically barged past Daryl as he sped-walked to the door, who was talking with Ed.

“Oww?” Daryl said. Ed too looked confused.

Leo stopped at the doorway and then turned back. He had a weird look in his eyes, but he plastered on a smile.

“Hey, uh, I gotta go. I’ll meet you guys at Buenos Burritos.” He pointed to Daryl as he said this, then dragged his hand to point at Ed. “I’ll call you later. There’s something... I need to ask you about.”

Now both looked confused. Leo covered quickly.

“It’s about streaming.”

That didn’t clear up anything, but at least now it seemed like he was being overly dramatic for less dramatic reasons.

“You want to stick around?” Ed offered.

“No-ho. No, no. I’ll call you.”

Leo turned and was out the door without another word.

Daryl, whose brows were still pinched questioningly, looked at Ed. “What was that?”

“I don’t know. I mean, you saw it. Your guess is as good as mine,” Ed said.

But that wasn’t quite true, because while Leo said it was about streaming... he seemed a little shaken. Almost like something spooked him. Almost like he heard something.

Ed’s guess was that Leo heard “something” moving in his crawlspace and that’s why he blazed out of here. Hopefully he just heard bumping and skitters and not something like a voice calling down thinking he was him.

He was a little eager to get everyone out of the apartment, but he managed to cover it up well enough to get them out the door. He walked out after them to watch them head down the stairs, making

more promises to meet up tomorrow before heading back inside.

And then heading straight into the pantry.

“Rambley?” he called up.

No answer. He knocked on the wall, but still there was nothing.

He walked further into the apartment, making it to the hallway and calling up at the ceiling.

“Rambley!”

“IN HERE!”

That voice was way closer than he imagined.

Ed narrowed it down to the office and pushed open the door just in time to see Rambley falling out of the closet and landing with a small ‘mph!’.

How in the-

“How in the-?!”

“Never mind that! Ed, we’ve got a DISASTER-wal-walking DISASTER on our hands!” Rambley babbled as he pushed himself up. He noticed that he knocked over a box over with him and hastily shoveled up the stuff that fell out and then shoved it back into the closet, trying to force the door closed.

Oh no. Ed had a bad feeling that he knew exactly what the disaster was. He still tried to keep his cool.

“Whoa, whoa. Calm down. What happened? What’s wrong?”

“I-I was- I climbed down into your bedroom and I-I came in and was standing right here!” Rambley gestured to the floor, and then to the door. “And then the DOOR opened and I thought you were bringing back your beanbag- Oh my GAH! What was I THINKING?! Of COURSE someone would see!” He covered his face in frustration.

“Was it Leo?” Ed asked quietly.

“Of course it would be! The one who already knows about Lloyd!”

“And you’re definitely sure he saw you?”

“We made direct eye contact!”

“Oh...That explains the uh... Okay, yeah.”

Rambley looked up past his hands, eyes wide.

“What?”

“He said he needed to talk to me later about something...”

“I’M the something!” Rambley said, patting his chest and then covering his face again. “I can’t believe I could’ve messed up so bad...”

He sounded close to tears, and it was then that Ed felt the need to intervene.

“Hey, no. You didn’t mess up... Okay, you messed up, but it’s alright. I’ll talk to him, and we can work out- Wait, did you say you climbed down into my bedroom? How?”

“Outside,” Rambley mumbled into his hands.

Ed was silent. Rambley stole a peek and found him staring at him with his mouth agape. It didn’t look much different from how Leo was looking at him.

Rambley tossed up his arms. “I messed up! I made the biggest mistake of my life! Sans that time I thought I could salt my own fish,” he mumbled the end. He rubbed his cheek worriedly, looking away. “But I... I don’t think anyone saw me outside... Just inside.”

“Then we can fix that!” Ed said. Maybe a little more stressed than he intended. “When Leo calls I’ll straighten things out. Explain things, smooth it over, and we’ll go from there. But, Buddy, you can’t just go climbing around outside.”

“I know that, I was just... I really don’t know what I was thinking...” Rambley murmured. He blinked and then straightened. “Wait, that’s not even how I got caught. My mess up was not hiding in the closet the second I heard someone. Which, by the way, is totally packed.”

“No, I’m counting the climbing around outside as a mess up. That’s crazy.”

“Isn’t that what you do on a daily basis?” Rambley asked flatly.

“Occasionally, but you can’t be seen!”

“Neither can you! You’ll get arrested!”

“Rambley...” Ed said with an unusually exasperated tone.

Rambley buckled instantly. “Okay, okay. It was a mistake... I’m sorry.”

Ed exhaled slowly, processing it all. “It’s okay. I’m sorry they dropped in like that. I didn’t even know they were coming.”

“I figured... How’s the pantry?”

“Looking pretty good. You only took out one shelf.”

“Oh good,” Rambley said with mild sarcasm.

They quietly headed out for the living room. Ed picking up a few more abandoned chip bags as Rambley sat on the couch. He crossed his legs and wrapped his tail around his waist, combing it in his lap.

Ed headed into the kitchen and stayed there for a while. It sounded like he was cooking something in the microwave but Rambley wandered if he was avoiding him. He had been pretty upset earlier, or as upset as Ed could get.

He wondered if he had seriously messed things up with him too. He didn’t want Ed thinking he was a

liability. He had one job to do, hide, and he successfully broke a shelf and STILL got caught.

He knew Ed would never be mean to him, but the idea of disappointing him hurt. Imagine if he suggested that he should go back to the park...

Ed came back out and Rambley turned to apologize again only to be surprised by a mug being offered to him. He knew exactly what it was before he took it into his hands, getting a big, thankful smile.

“Aww, Eddie. You didn’t have to!”

“No prob. That was the plan, right?” Ed asked with his own smile.

It was an assurance that all was alright. He wasn't in trouble; he wasn't going to get kicked out.

“Yes, but I sort of thought... Heh, thank you.”

He looked down into the mug only to furrow his brows at the clump of marshmallow inside. He

looked at Ed's mug, which he sat down on the coffee table as he headed towards his bedroom, and noticed there was a matching clump in him. Not intact marshmallows but a melted mass.

"...Eddie, are these marshmallows from the casserole?" Rambley asked.

"Yeah, but they're fine. Marshmallows are too magical to go stale."

"I said fun," Rambley clarified.

"Magical~," Ed emphasized with a waggle of his fingers.

Ah well. He knew from experience that an old marshmallow wasn't necessarily a bad one. He blew on his mug, waiting for Ed to come back with a big blanket. He tossed it over the back of them and sat down, grabbing the remote and beginning to flip through menus to get to the Christmas stuff.

Rambley started to lift the mug to his mouth- this was it, his first taste of Christmas cocoa!... Only to hesitate when he remembered something.

“Oh, umm... by the way. We should probably talk about how your friends are trying to get you to take them to the park and the Haunted Castle, which is likely currently crawling with the same genetically modified bats that almost chomped on us inside of Mineshaft Drop,” Rambley said matter-of-factly.

Ed hissed through his teeth. “Yeahhh...”

“Are you taking them?” Rambley asked

Why did Ed have a feeling that there was a silent ‘don’t you dare’ hidden in there?

“Nope.”

“Good! One big mistake is enough for today,” he said with a nervous chuckle. He glanced over at Ed and then back forward again, looking thoroughly flustered as he took a quick sip of the cocoa.

It was scorching hot but oh so sweet. Especially with the foamy melted marshmallow on top. Unlike normal ones that might've gotten softer over time, the fluff got soft instantly.

It was exactly what he was anticipating! It had lived up entirely to the image he had in his mind!

As Ed clicked on a movie- an Indigo Park one that didn't feature him or his pals, but a rendition of a Christmas Carol- and settled in with his own mug, Rambley subtly scooted a little closer and pulled the blanket over his own shoulders.

This was the life! It helped him forget all about today. Well, he might've had to help that process out, but he was already feeling a lot better. He took a deep breath and embraced that this was alright.

That he wasn't alone.

That Ed had his back.

And all those worries melted away like a marshmallow puff in cocoa and for the moment, everything was sweet.

As sweet as chocolate.

...

...

...

“WAIT, I’M A RACCOON! I CAN’T DRINK CHOCOLATE!?” Ed was no stranger to Rambley’s more cuddly tendencies.

Pretty much the moment he had been given the word that hugs were okay, he started dishing them out whenever he could. He liked hand holding and supportive pats and certainly didn’t mind scooting closer when they were watching television together. There were even a couple of cases where they fell asleep together on the couch.

So, Ed wasn't surprised that they ended up like this. What he was surprised by was that it happened while they were both awake.

They had gotten only a quarter of the way through the movie before Rambley shifted closer and leaned against his shoulder. Ed didn't mind- in fact, he thought maybe Rambley was getting a little sad again and put an arm around his shoulders, like any good friend would do. Rambley returned the favor by eventually curling his tail around him like a puffy, narrow blanket.

And it wasn't until Rambley's head was on his shoulder, his eyes half-lidded, bundled up at his side that Ed realized this might've been a little more than friendly- not that he was complaining.

Not that he was going to admit that maybe this was part of what he was anticipating when he brought Rambley home with him. It might've crossed his mind once or twice.

Gee, maybe this was the sort of thing Ed needed to consider the bigger implications of...

But then again, not overthinking it got him to this point, so maybe it was best to keep going with the flow. It was a lot warmer this way anyways.

Ed was sipping on Rambley's mug of cocoa now while Rambley's emptied mug of apple cider was now sitting on the coffee table by Ed's other mug. Thankfully, Rambley ended up enjoying the cider as much as he might've enjoyed the cocoa- after he went and scrubbed his mouth out and googled whether two sips of hot chocolate would set off a chain reaction that led to death.

But when nothing happened, the night went on as normal. Back to the couch, to the blankets, and to the movies.

Back to cozying up with his partner in crime.

And then his phone buzzed.

Ed would've been content with ignoring it. It was stuck on the other side of the couch on the arm rest, just out of arm's length. His arms were busy anyway, so it seemed fine to just let it go. Just in case it was Katie trying to check up or Laura texting to ask about what went down. It could all wait; he wanted to stay just like this a little longer.

Unfortunately, Rambley was awake and noticed the buzz as well. He leaned back the other way and reached for it.

"I've got it!"

He picked up the phone and went to pass it to Ed, briefly skimming the screen to see what the message said, and then he froze up. He stared at the screen.

"What?" Ed asked.

Rambley got an incredibly concerned look. Eyes wide, pupils shrunk, and mouth a wobbling line.

“Uh oh,” Ed guessed. “What’s up?”

“Uhhh... Heheh...” Rambley laughed nervously.

And then tossed the cellphone into Ed’s hands and practically dove off the couch.

“I’llbeinthebedroom!” he rushed out as he rushed out and right into the bedroom and shut the door behind him.

Ed watched him go with a confused blink and looked down at his phone, pulling up the message that had minimized by then. Seeing only then that there were actually two messages.

Leo: Hey

Leo: So I’m parked outside

Well, that explained it.

“Oh right, the talk,” Ed mumbled to himself. He exhaled tiredly.

Right then another message popped up.

Leo: With Laura

Uh oh. That meant he was probably coming in.

That also probably meant that Laura told him what was going on, so there went the chance of trying to fib his way out of this one. He should've been relieved to not have to lie but instead it just made everything a whole lot more complicated.

But Leo could keep a secret... right?

...

Okay, yeah. The talk with Leo was going to happen. But first-!

He headed over to his bedroom door and started to open it. A sudden weight rammed against it and shoved it closed with him still holding the doorknob.

"It's just me," he said.

“...Oh, right,” he heard muffled through the door. Rambley cracked it open and whispered through. “Eddie, you can’t let him back in!”

“I don’t think we’ve got a choice. We’ve got to explain what’s going on. But Laura’s out there with him.”

Rambley looked at him like he spoke in a different language. “...Why?”

“... Backup?” Ed tried to joke.

“Oh, he is SUCH a Lloyd,” Rambley said with a roll of his eyes. “Can’t you just explain it to him outside?”

“I would, but the neighbors might hear and if they find out I’m living with a raccoon my rent’s definitely going up.”

This one almost made it, the corner of his mouth twitched, but Rambley held firm.

“Ugh, fine. But I’m staying in here, okay?” he asked worriedly. “I-I don’t really want him to see me again... He’ll think I’m weird...”

“Aww, come on. You’re great! You were literally designed to be huggable, you said that yourself.”

“Hehe, I say a lot of things,” Rambley said with a flustered smile. “But I must stand my ground, Eddie! I’ll be right in here if you need me, and out the window if he comes looking.”

“Yeah, yeah. Don’t do anything crazy... again.”

Rambley shot him an equally worried and equally cheeky look before closing the door and leaving Ed to clean up their mess alone.

Well, no. Technically this was Rambley’s mess. He was the one who climbed down from the loft-... But also, Ed was the one who let the guys in without knowing where Rambley was and forced him up into that attic. Alright, maybe it was a little more of his mess than his buddy’s.

Besides, this would probably go easier if Leo didn't have to look at the living cartoon character.

Ed quickly texted him back.

Ed: Sure. Come on up and bring Laura.

Leo: Can't you come down here?

Ed considered it.

Ed: I think we should talk in here if that's ok. I don't want my neighbors hearing.

Leo didn't answer for a long second. Ed couldn't tell if he was hesitating or discussing it with Laura, but he took the time to text an addition.

Ed: He's in the room with the door shut. He won't hurt you.

Another pause. He started to get a little worried when he received another text, though it wasn't from Leo.

Laura: we're coming up!

That was that then. Ed put his phone back on the armrest and walked over to the front door, feeling uncharacteristically antsy. But hey, it was a special occasion. Not every day a disaster like this happens.

He was sort of hoping they would get further than a week before a disaster would show up, but beggars can't be choosers.

There was a short, rhythmic knock on the front door. Ed recognized it right away as being Laura's and went to answer it. Sure enough, she was standing there in front with Leo noticeably behind her.

She had a small 'welp, looks like you messed up' sort of smile. In fact, he could imagine her saying just that in his head as he saw her face. He didn't even say anything in his defense, he just stepped aside and opened the door to let them in. Laura came inside.

“I told you, I’m not going in,” Leo whispered.

“Quit being a baby,” Laura whispered back.

“Are you serious?”

“Hiiii,” she said to Ed, pointedly ignoring Leo’s second question. “So, I heard you had a little ambush.”

“That’s a good word for it,” Ed agreed. “Yeaah, it was a drop-in.”

“And he was?”

“In the back.”

“And he isss?”

“Still in the back.”

“Good! See? He’s in the back. Come on in,” Laura said, finally turning towards and acknowledging Leo again.

He didn't look thrilled, and when she waved for him to come in, he got a downright shaken look. Something close to what Rambley got when he saw that text on his phone.

Ed sighed to himself and opened the door farther.

"Leo, come in. You saw him. You know he's not going to attack you," he said.

Leo considered it for a long second, and then, taking a noticeable deep breath of his own, stepped into the apartment. Laura headed into the living room and Ed shut the door behind him.

"Don't lock it," Leo mumbled.

"Leo, it's fine. It's totally safe. Besides, I can't risk it. You never know when Katie might show back up," Ed lightly joked.

Leo gave a somewhat complaining sound but didn't stop him. He followed Ed into the living room.

Laura was standing at the coffee table looking into one of Ed's mugs. She looked up at him with wide eyes and held it out.

"He didn't drink this, did he?!"

"No, he had cider."

"Oh, thank God!" Laura thumped the mug back on the table and flopped onto the couch. "There's no way we could've gotten him to a vet."

Ed chuckled, feeling some of the tension easing up. He sat down beside her, leaving Leo the armchair closer to the front door in case he wanted to make a run for it. He was already looking like he was considering it.

"...You were drinking hot chocolate out of two mugs?" Laura asked, sobering back up.

"He caught it on the first sip," Ed explained.

Laura swatted him on the arm.

“Ow! What’s that for? I didn’t remember either!”

“Yeah, well you’re supposed to!” Laura scolded. She crossed her arms in a very huffy, very Rambley-like way. Ed got a goofy smile from the mental image. “Don’t give me that look.”

“I’m not. I just remembered something funny. Not the chocolate.”

“I’d HOPE not the chocolate.”

“You’re talking about him right? He can’t eat chocolate- like a dog, right? Is it them or cats?” Leo asked uneasily.

“It’s both, and raccoons too. Pretty much all animals can’t eat chocolate. It’s a no-go,” Laura explained.

“You can sit down. It’s okay,” Ed offered.

“I’ll be a straight shot from the hallway,” Leo reminded, gesturing his hand towards it.

“The coffee table’s here. He’d run right into it.”

“He could just-...” Leo seemed to suddenly recognize the stupidity of the debate and with an exasperated grumble sat down in the armchair.

“Happy?”

“I’d be a lot happier if this wasn’t how this happened,” Ed admitted.

From there he started and stopped a few times, trying to get his words together. He was never good with words unless he was behind a mic, and in this case he wasn’t just up front and center but also had really one shot to smooth this over without making things worse. It was a lot of pressure; not just something he could push past or bolt away from.

“So... You saw him.”

“Yessiree.”

“And he’s... I mean, he’s obviously Rambley the Raccoon.”

“Uh huh.” Leo was now eyeing the hallway. “You shut the door right?”

“He’s in the bedroom.” Leo started to jump up. “The door’s shut. Look at it.” Leo sat back down. “Just... Okay, so about a month ago I went to Indigo Park... And when I was there, I found that there were some things left behind. Like, remember that thing we heard in the back of the theater? The mascots we were talking about, they left them there- Indigo did when they shut down the park.”

“Quick question,” Leo chimed in. “Does ‘Rambley’-.” He made quotations with his fingers. “-Know about ‘Rambley’?” He pointed towards the door.

“He does...”

“And he just let you take him out of the park and bring him here?” Leo asked in disbelief.

Ed got a very telling smile. “So, funny story! When I first got to the park I couldn’t find anyone. So, I went into this check-in office, and this screen comes on and there’s Rambley! That’s how we met. He tells me we have to get the power on, so I turned around and went into this sort of walk-in closet-.”

“Wait a second, is he-?!” Leo cut himself off and restarted in a whisper instead of a shout. “Is HE the security guard you’ve been hanging out with?!” He pointed towards the door.

“...Yes. But let me explain-.”

“Was HE what was chasing us at the warehouse?!” Leo choked.

“No! No, no. That wasn’t him,” Ed said. He waved his hands defensively. “That was something else.”

“That was Lloyd,” Laura said.

Ed whipped back around at her with a look of shock and betrayal.

“What? He already knows about Rambley and the mascots. We should tell him about Lloyd, he’s been a huge problem!” Laura defended.

“Wait, there’s a LLOYD too?!”

“Yeah, but he’s not-.”

“Wait, wait...”

“The other ones are sick.”

“Wait, wait. Hold on a second.” Leo put a hand up to stop him as he looked down, lost in thought for a moment. His eyes scanning the carpet as he thought back and- “...That big Lloyd from the theater show? That one animatronic that looked really real?” he asked, looking back up and between them.

“It was real,” Ed said. “The mascots at Indigo Park are different. They’re not robots, they’re animal

hybrids that are grown in a lab and then have chips put into their brains. But what happened was that there was some sort of virus that they caught- Rambley doesn't have it! He's immune! But the others were infected with this sort of super rabies and they act like wild animals. But not Rambley. He's totally normal, and he's like half raccoon plushie body and half AI, which is why he can control the screens."

Leo was clearly in shock. "That's... That's really messed up," he said.

"Just think of it like this," Laura said simply. "They're like furies. You love them!"

"Wha- THANKS! Thanks for saying that in front of HIM!" Leo gestured wildly at the bedroom door. "And I don't LOVE furies, I just go to furry conventions."

"You have a fursuit!"

"It's a cosplay!"

This devolved into a strange whisper-shout argument between the two, splitting hairs about a topic that was slowly deviating further and further away from the fuzzy, striped elephant who was no doubt standing with his ear pressed to the bedroom door listening, and probably already looking up definitions on the internet right now. There was a conversation that would no doubt be fun to have.

“Please God, if you’re listening. Don’t let Rambley post anything about furies in my chat.”

But with the conversation going off track and Leo up to speed, maybe it was time to take the plunge.

“Do... you want to meet him?” Ed offered.

“I think I already did,” Leo said with some exasperation.

“No, wait. You should! Trust me, once you meet him, you’ll get it,” Laura encouraged.

“I don’t want to meet him,” Leo whispered through his teeth.

“You have no choice,” she whispered right back.

“I’ll just go get him...?” Ed said unsurely.

“No.”

“Go get him.”

Ed started to get up.

“I’m telling you guys, if he comes out here, I’m leaving.”

“Just meet him for two seconds! He’s not going to do anything.”

Ed headed to the bedroom door.

“Y’know, you say that, but-.”

“He’s a raccoon! Even if he was feral, what’s he going to do? You’ve seen him, he’s short!”

“He’s way bigger than any raccoon I’ve ever seen!”

Both quieted down when Ed knocked on the door.

“Heyyyy, it’s me. I’m...”

Being watched very closely by Laura and Leo.

“I’m just going to come in.”

Thankfully, Rambley either didn’t know about the lock on the door or had forgotten to lock it. Ed let himself inside easily.

He half-expected Rambley to either be out the window or hiding in his closet, and he was half right on half of that account- Rambley had his closet open and was scrounging around inside.

“It’s too late, he already knows you’re here,” Ed partially joked.

“Heh, good one,” Rambley said flatly. Though his nerves won over, and he got an anxious look.

“D-D’you have any sweaters or anything I could borrow? Something, um... Christmassy? But it doesn’t have to be a Christmas sweater- I know they have a reputation of looking pretty ugly and I really need something that looks nice, but not absurdly nice. Casually warm nice.”

Wait, was he getting dressed to go meet Leo? Either that or he was cold and wanted to look aesthetically pleasing- either way, Ed came over to start checking the closet before moving to the dresser.

He scrounged through before finding a turtleneck that he probably should’ve worn to Thanksgiving because no doubt his mom bought it. He pulled it out and presented it to Rambley.

“Green?”

“Perfect. Thank you.”

Rambley all but snatched it from him, draping it over his arm before removing his bandana and setting it on the bed. He pulled the sweater on and comfortably smoothed it down.

“What did you tell your friends my name was? Maybe I should go by that,” he said.

He picked up his bandana again and started to put it on, only to hesitate. He held it out, staring at it for a long moment, and then sat it back down on the bed. He rubbed his arm, looking at the floor unsurely.

“Maybe, y’know, it’ll take the sting out if I’m more of my own person.”

That hurt. Ed loved seeing Rambley break character and show how much more he was than just that character, but seeing him seemingly shirk his own identity just because he was afraid of getting judged, that he wouldn’t be taken seriously, that it might creep someone out? That didn’t seem right. It bothered Ed in a way that was hard to pin down.

He should've been encouraging Rambley to be his own person... but this didn't feel like the way to go about it.

"You don't have to change your name for him. You only do that if you want to," Ed said.

He looked down at the bandana before picking it up and starting to put it around Rambley's neck. The raccoon looked a little surprised and Ed paused, only continuing when he got approval from Rambley turning so he could tie the back into a neat bow. Not as neat as Rambley's but close enough.

Rambley seemed to loosen up a bit now that it was back on. He smoothed it down over the sweater before looking up attentively and holding out his arms.

"How do I look?"

Ed gave him a thumbs up.

"Use your words, Ed," Rambley teased.

“Adorable.”

Rambley tittered. “You always know just what to say.” He took a deep breath. “Okay! I’m ready...”

“Want me to go first?” Ed offered.

“Nope! I’ll chicken out!”

With that, Rambley strode to the door, grabbed ahold of the knob, and then slowed down considerably as he inched open the door and peeked out through the little crack. He caught sight of Laura’s face and pushed it mostly closed again.

“Okay. You can do this!” he whispered to himself.

“Yeah!” Ed encouraged.

“Here I go!”

Rambley inched the door open with a noticeable squeak. He winced, ears tilting back, but continued to drag it open and cautiously stepped out.

Both were looking right at him. Laura breaking into a smile and Leo looking like he was about to break into a run. He was even grabbing the armrests like he was about to spring up.

It was best to get this over with. Rambley hopped out the rest of the way, slapping on a charming smile and shaking off his nerves. He waved at Leo.

“H-Hi again! I think we got off on the wrong foot earlier. I’m-!”

“That’s so CUTE!” Laura gushed. She instantly became apologetic. “Sorry, just, you look great!”

“Heh. Uh, thank you, Laura,” Rambley said sheepishly. He was certainly flattered but too nervous to enjoy it. He got back into character for his proper introduction. “I’m Rambley. Rambley the-...

Rambley... Flatts!... Milllstoone. Rambley
Flatts-Millstone.”

Ed looked at him with mild confusion but didn’t ask yet.

“I know this is all pretty confusing and overwhelming, but I’m not going to hurt you. I’m completely harmless! AND completely immune to the virus at Indigo Park. It’s not the sort of virus you just catch from a cough, it’s a lot more complicated than that,” Rambley assured. He clasped his hands at his front. “And before you ask, that was me on the screen guiding you guys around the park. Annnd if you’ve been to Indigo Park in the last few years of it being open, I was the meet-and-greet mascot at Rambley’s Treehouse,” he said proudly, pointing a thumb to his chest.

“Ohhh,” Leo said. Less like he had something to say and more like he felt required to say something. Eyes were still wide though.

“Heh heh, uh...” Rambley’s smile became a little more strained and tugged at his bandana and sweater neck. If he was on a screen his little avatar might’ve been sweating bullets. “That’s right. Real living Rambley here.”

“Hey, Real Living Rambley. Come on down,” Laura said offered. “I want to hear about the disaster from your point of view.”

“Thank you, but I think I’m just going to stand. My voice will reach better that way!”

“Not you too!”

“What? Doesn’t a guy need to stretch his legs now and then? You’re the nurse-in-training, I’d expect you to be supportive of that!” Rambley teased, hands on his hips.

Only to get a little nudge on the back from Ed.

“Oh, excuse me, Eddie,” Rambley said and stepped aside. Only to have Ed nudge him further. “What are

you- Hey!” Ed practically maneuvered him to the other armchair, encouraging him to sit down. Rambley gave a disapproving little huff. “Okay, okay. Fine,” he grumbled. He climbed into the armchair, pulling up and crossing his legs. “Happy?”

“Getting there,” Ed replied. He scooted over to sit by Laura. Rambley was tempted to stop him, to keep him close, but held back.

“You didn’t drink the hot chocolate, right?” Laura asked worriedly.

“No more than a swallow! Which was a mistake, ough. Now I get to know what I’m missing out on. At least I can still have the marshmallows.”

“In cider?”

“Eww, no! Just straight out of the bag, thank you!”

“You’re real,” Leo interrupted. It was as though it just clicked. “You’re really Rambley.”

“As real as can be!” Rambley chirped. “You can hug me if you want to make sure.”

Leo got a weird look.

“Or not! I’m getting in my hug quota with Eddie,” Rambley said with a nervous chuckle.

“I bet you are,” Laura said, rolling her eyes pointedly towards Ed.

“And you were the security guard.”

“Guilty as charged!”

“Whoa... How long were you hanging around in there?”

“Since before the park closed,” Rambley said tiredly.

“I was made to replace the older, inferior Rambley model. Who is extremely unpleasant, just ask Ed and Laura. I was made both to watch over guests and greet them as virtual Rambley and run a meet-and-greet and photo op at my house in the

square, but when the park closed I was left behind, and I've been surviving ever since. It hasn't been too hard since they left behind plenty of my food, but it's been pretty lonely... And then, one day, Eddie showed up! The rest is history!" he said with a little wink.

It was very realistic- more realistic than any costume he had seen. It was too real to be an animatronic, too fluid, too fuzzy.

Just like when he had seen Lloyd all those years ago.

"There was a Lloyd too. I remember seeing a show with Lloyd when I was a kid and he looked real too."

"I had a feeling you'd ask about him," Rambley said with a lopsided smile. "He was! Though his mascot body was an earlier model than mine is. That's why I look a little closer to cartoon realism than he did."

"What happened to him? He got infected with some sort of... zombie REC virus?"

“He’s... out of commission at the moment,” Rambley admitted, smile slipping. “It was a little bit of a wreck...”

“So, he’s a wild animal?”

“Wasn’t he always?” Rambley asked flatly. He caught himself quickly. “Ha ha, I mean... Yes and no. His last mascot is running loose around the park but that’s... that’s not really him anymore.”

Leo couldn’t even pretend like he wasn’t disappointed. In one fell swoop he learned that the beloved characters from his childhood could be practically real and that his favorite of the bunch was some insane rabid animal that was running loose across the park. He had heard the term ‘never meet your heroes’ but he never thought he’d hear it this dramatic.

“So, Lloyd’s sort of... gone?” he asked.

“...Wellll, technically no. All of my friends have backups that hold their entire being. Or, well, copies of their intelligence. This body of Lloyd’s has gone rabid and, gosh, there might be some shred of him still in there... No, probably not. I would guess that the chip is extremely damaged and that’s why he’s like this... Anyways! What I’m saying is that the real Lloyd is in a backup disc somewhere in the park, just like my friends Molly and Finley. We’ve been looking for these discs to bring them back and so far we have a good lead on Mollie’s... but nobody else.”

“Is that why you’ve been hanging out there?” Lloyd asked Ed.

“It was mostly for-.” Ed gestured his hand towards Rambley.

“Yes, but the original plan was also to fix up the park... but that seems like an impossible dream now. Kind of silly too when you think about it. Two gentlemen fixing up a whole park on their own? Only on the big screen.”

Rambley looked at the floor sadly. His hands twiddling together in his lap as he was reminded of the likelihood of the park coming back- and wondering if he would even still be welcome in it if it did.

Ed noticed that look and between that and Leo's mix of confusion and disappointment, and Laura looking at him like he was supposed to say something, he decided that it was time to act.

"But hey, since we're all out here, let's do something," he said. He reached under the couch.

"Like what?" Leo asked uneasily.

"Like lose a couple of games of Connect Four," he finished, plopping the box down on the coffee table.

Rambley perked up instantly. "I wouldn't say I'm that good, but I miiiight be something of an expert when it comes to predicting moves," he said. He hopped down and knelt in front of the coffee table, cracking his knuckles. "Whose up first?"

He looked pointedly at Leo in a quiet challenge. Leo looked at Ed and Laura and found them looking at him too.

“...No thanks.”

“Oh, come on, Leo! I don’t bite!” Rambley said. His tail swished playfully. “Unless you cheat. Then I might give you a little nip.”

Leo looked directly at Ed.

“He’s joking,” Ed assured.

“Maybe,” Rambley said teasingly. Leo gave him an uneasy look and Rambley quickly deflated. “Okay, okay, I am. But I’m very good!”

Leo was still more than a little wary about getting too close, but...

He cautiously lowered down to the floor on the other side of the coffee table. Rambley's eyes would've sparkled if they could've.

This was good! He was starting to get more comfortable.

Rambley hid his own trepidation a lot more. He had been downright terrified when he walked out of that bedroom, afraid that this was going to be a total disaster and Leo was going to tear out of here and tell everyone about what he saw. That would be a real problem if anyone believed him.

He had to make a good impression... but that wasn't the only reason why he wanted to.

Maybe this was another chance to make a new friend. He just had to show him that he was more than just what was shown in the cartoons. Show him all his colors even without the spectacle of the screen.

He quickly set up the frame of the Connect Four before looking past at Leo.

“By the way, there’s something I’ve been dying to ask you,” he said.

“What?”

Rambley pushed the Connect Four frame aside and folded his hands on the table, giving him his full attention.

“Where in the world did you get your Lloyd costume from? I recognized that it wasn’t an Indigo Park mascot suit. Believe me, those were terrible. It’s no wonder that it seemed like a better idea to GROW living mascots than have those walking around,” Rambley said with a little snicker. “But YOURS was incredible! Did you make it yourself?”

“I- Uh- No.” Leo seemed to get a little more nervous. Eyes briefly flickering towards the couch. “It was, uh... Made-to-order by a... custom costume company,” he finished with an awkward cough.

“Ooo, really? Think you might be able to tell me the name? I would love to see what other costumes they’ve made. And who knows! Maybe there’s a chance we can get the park fixed up and then we would be in serious need of some really fancy costumes. And actors who understood the characters.”

Rambley was doing his best to extend an olive branch.

Leo felt increasingly like he was being exposed.

“I don’t know off the top of my head I’ll have to check and get back to you,” he rushed out.

“Oh great! Thank you! Hey, have you thought about maybe dressing like other characters? Liiike maybe more important characters? Hmm?”

“Rambley, buddy,” Ed interjected.

“Not that there’s anything wrong with Lloyd! He’s... greeeat,” Rambley drug out.

That sounded very unconvincing.

“Well, let’s get down to business!”

Rambley pulled the Connect Four frame between them, taking up the red chips, and the game began.

To his surprise, Leo was the first person to give Rambley a run for his money. Probably because of his years of taking chess lessons. A different game entirely but involved a lot of the same things; patience, planning, and watching the other player. Rambley had gotten a little too comfortable and lost the first game. A first for him.

“Oh, so that’s how it is?”

And immediately came around and won the second. The third was a tie. Then the fourth. Then the fifth.

“Can I get a turn?” Ed asked.

“Not until we break the sudden death,” Rambley muttered. His hands tented as he stared at the frame intensely.

At this point Leo wasn't even afraid anymore, he was just becoming increasingly concerned that he was going to be stuck playing Connect Four for the rest of the night. Needless to say, he threw the next game.

Or at least, he tried to. He left himself open in a very obvious way, giving him an easy win and an untouched fourth spot, and for some reason Rambley decided to completely ignore it and keep playing. The second time Leo made it look more believable that he missed it and that time Rambley went for the kill. Or the fourth spot.

“And there we go, four in a row! Wow that was a close one- we almost filled up the tray again!” Rambley said. “I'm impressed! You really know your Connect Four!”

“I used to play chess, so that could’ve helped.”

“Really? Eddie, do you have a chess set?”

Oh no.

“No, sorry. I have Monopoly though.”

Oh no.

“Mmm, we might have to save that for another night. It’s looking like Laura’s getting ready to turn in,” Rambley joked, pointing towards the currently yawning woman.

“Yeah, I’m beat,” Laura confessed with a stretch.
“We should probably get going. I need to get home and take a shower.”

“Yeah, and I’ve got to reevaluate my life,” Leo agreed distantly.

“I know. Once you meet the real thing it’s hard to go back to Lloyd,” Rambley said cheekily. His smile

softened up considerably. “I’m kidding. I know this is all a lot for you, but I would really, really appreciate it if you don’t tell anyone else. Please?” He asked with big, begging eyes.

“Uh y... yeah, I’m not going to tell,” Leo agreed.

Who could he tell who would even believe him? Besides, he wouldn’t do Ed dirty like that. Even if this did just go from an obsession with an abandoned park to some sort of crazy amusement park conspiracy sort of thing. Leo had seen enough movies to know that this was probably one of those things where staying quiet was the better option, lest it get back to his folks. Like it always did.

“Whew! What a relief! Thank you,” Rambley said honestly.

The three humans started to get up, probably so Ed could walk them to the door. Laura scooted past him, leaned in, and whispered an almost subtle, “Give him a hug.”

“No?” Leo said questioningly.

“It’s totally worth it. Hug him.”

“Oh, one more thing!” Rambley sprung up from the floor, brushing down his sweater before his eyes flickered over the three before stopping on Ed. “I noticed that when your friends were here, they were talking about going back to the park...”

Ed hissed through his teeth. “Right... They were asking if I’d take them back.”

“They were?” Laura asked in confusion.

“Yeah, and it’s your fault,” Ed said with no actual blame. Pointing at her.

“Me? What did I do?”

“Showed them pictures of the Haunted Castle.”

“...Ohhh- but I was just showing them that the lights were on!”

“Yeah, and Katie wants me to take them up there.”
Ed turned back to Rambley, “But I blew them off. I told them maybe in Spring, but they’ll probably forget by then.”

“I’m more afraid that they might try to head up there without you since you said no,” Rambley said worriedly.

“They said they wouldn’t. Or if they’re going to, they’re going to call me first. Then I can take care of it.”

“Are you sure? I don’t remember anyone calling you about the Halloween Party,” Rambley said matter-of-factly. “In fact, I seem to recall dozens of people inviting themselves into Indigo Park.”

“Rambley, you were the one on-board with the Halloween Part. You invited them,” Ed reminded.

“And since when have I been an unbiased judge? You know I can’t resist candy, guest, and a good

time! That's basically my whole shtick in the simplest terms," Rambley said coyly. Though it dropped almost instantly. "But ever since you know who became a problem we can't trust anyone just wandering into the park. Especially without a Critter Cuff and without ME there to babysit them."

"Geez, Lloyd really gets around, doesn't he?" Leo asked. Laura looked at him with confused pursed lips.

"He does but he's the least of our problems," Rambley remarked. He clapped his hands together. "So, we're in agreement! It's now our duty- or since you three are their friends, your duty- to make sure nobody else goes sneaking into the park. Especially not while I'm on vacation."

"You got it, Rambley," Laura said with a salute. She elbowed Leo.

"There's no way I'm telling them to go back there."

Rambley frowned a little bit but he covered it up quickly. He was looking nervous again, adjusting his bandana with a lopsided smile.

He really did look like the real thing.

...Ah, what the heck. He probably didn't have that much bite strength-

"It was cool to meet you, Rambley. Glad it wasn't, like... Glad it wasn't Marv."

He stretched his arms out stiffly. Rambley caught the suggestion and gasped, got a brilliant smile, and swiftly circled the coffee table.

"Me too! I much prefer an Indigo fan like myself," he said with a giggle. He held out his arms. "Put 'er there!"

They hugged. He was very soft and he smelled like... Well, he smelled like the back of a closet, but maybe that was the sweater. From the size sticker stuck to the back it probably wasn't worn much.

Rambley was practically buzzing as they pulled apart and waved as he and Laura headed to the door. A wide toothy grin on his face and his hands clasped together.

He actually hugged him. Sometimes even guests didn't hug him! That meant he did a good job. That meant he made a new pal, and he felt incredible!

"Hey, thanks for not going to the cops. I owe you one," Ed partially joked.

"Don't sweat it. I expect the, uh, bribe money in the mail?" Leo tried to joke.

"I've got twenty bucks and some sweet potatoes with no marshmallows on them."

"Ah, the streamer life. Scraping by every step of the way," Leo properly joked. Then whipped around and was out the door. "I'll see ya."

“We’re never going to see him again, are we?” Laura cracked. She headed out the door with a wave. “I’ll call Katie and clear things up!”

“Thanks! Night!”

“Night!”

The door was shut, locked, and Ed turned back toward the living room. Only to see Rambley with that big smile.

“What are you smiling about?” he teased.

“What do you think? That went GREAT! I was so worried when he was afraid to even come in, but that went really well!” Rambley cheered. He put his hands on his cheeks. “D’you think he thinks of me as a friend now?!”

“He’s... probably considering it,” Ed said, rubbing the back of his neck. “I mean, you just met.”

“You’re right, you’re right. I can’t rush these things,” Rambley agreed. He seemed unbothered by it and just as excited. “But I hope he does! After all, he did hug me. That’s a good step to getting myself a brand-new friend. Imagine three besties; one more and we’ll have our own little pal posse!”

“Right!” Ed agreed.

But then while Rambley was putting the Connect Four under the couch, he thought about what he had said.

“Rambley, you have more than two friends,” he pointed out.

“No, Eddie, I don’t think I do,” Rambley said matter-of-factly.

“What about Mollie and Finley? And Salem, probably. I know you don’t really count Lloyd-.”

“Eddie, please, we both know that I don’t.”

His tone had dropped. A solemn defeat, shutting down Ed's assurances in their tracks.

Was that why he stopped asking about Mollie? Why he hadn't had any interest in getting her backup disc? That was... sad. That was really sad.

"I just can't believe he hugged me! I don't think you realize this since you're so daring, but that's a HUGE step for someone who is super afraid of me!"

But... Rambley was still happy, so Ed decided to leave it there.

"You... don't think he's going to tell, right?" Rambley asked, rubbing his arm. "Not even his friends?"

"No. I know where he lives."

He gave a little scoff. "Good."

"But I've got to ask."

"Hmm?"

Ed got a quirked smile. “Flatts-Millstone?”

“I was wondering if you’d ask about that!” Rambley laughed a little as he got back on the couch, patting beside him. “Remember that nice doctor I told you about? The one who was there when I first woke up and spent a lot of time calibrating me and testing my reflexes?”

“I remember. Marnie, right?” Ed asked. He sat down beside him.

“Right! Dr. Marnie Millstone. She had to be the nicest scientist in the whole park. And she was the one who worked on my body the most, so in a way, she was sort of like a mom to me! If I’d take anyone’s last name, it’d be hers.”

Rambley had only mentioned a doctor named Marnie once but he said nothing but good thing. Though all Ed knew was that she was nice and encouraging. Considering what Ed had seen in the

labs and around the park about how the staff treated the mascots, the woman could've been a saint.

“Of course, then there's Simon Flatts, the man who created the original idea of me. With him creating the inside and her building the outside, it only seemed fair to carry both of their names,” Rambley explained. He twiddled his thumbs. “It's the closest thing I have to parents.”

“Makes sense to me. Though I sort of thought you'd go with Indigo.”

“Well... Sure, Issac Indigo WAS the father of Indigo Park and the brand of Indigo as we know it!... But... I don't know, I just don't really... Want to have Indigo as a last name,” Rambley quietly admitted. “There's already so much of Indigo all over me. This is something I can choose for myself.”

“I feel that. It's not just a name, it's you. So, why not make it something you want?”

“Exactly!”

“I don’t even remember if you had a canon last name. Unless it was like ‘Raccoon’.”

“I didn’t. Well- No. But there was this one comic series that gave me the last name Razzle. Rambley Razzle. But I don’t know, it kinda sounds fake,” he said with a sly little smile. “This might not fit the character, but it fits me.”

Ed agreed with that. It felt warm and human, just like Rambley was.

...He considered telling him then. It was right on the tip of his tongue, to tell him the backstory of his own last name, but he instantly decided against it. It wasn’t worth bringing it up.

“Heyyy, can we...” Rambley scooted closer and rested his head on his shoulder. “Can we go back to this...?”

“Sure!” Ed hooked his arm back around him.

“Oh, GREAT! I just thought maybe it was a little bold of me to ask...”

Rambley went right back to his previous cuddly behavior. Hugging on tightly and tucking in close, more than ready to return to a quiet night. Ed was too. Don't overthink it, go with the flow. Hug the raccoon.

But there was one last question that was itching at him.

“So, what made you change your mind about meeting Leo?”

Rambley hummed, considering whether to be honest or use an easy excuse. He went with honesty.

“...I didn't want him to think I was like Lloyd. You were telling him about the feral mascots...” he admitted.

“You didn't have to. He probably figured it out when he saw you. Y'know, once the shock wore off.”

“It wasn’t enough. I needed to prove I was the- the real deal. Make a good impression.” He looked up at Ed. “Did I?”

“Always.”

“Good!”

Then it was back to normal for the moment. At least until they had to stop everything to search for the remote. Then everything was quiet once again, and this time without any looming dread or worries hanging over their heads. Back to their new status quo.

Everything was fine.

...

..

...

“So, what did you think?” Laura asked as she started up the car.

“That was weird,” Leo admitted.

“Which part?” she asked teasingly.

“...I just met a cartoon character from my childhood- How are you not more shocked about this?” he asked. He waved a hand back between the seats, gesturing off towards the building. “There’s talking animals living in Indigo Park EATING PEOPLE.”

“Who said anyone was eaten?!”

“I haven’t seen Russ recently.”

“Oh, come on.” Laura began to pull out of the parking lot. “Russ has split for a lot longer than this.”

“I guess so...”

“But you can’t tell.”

“Who am I going to tell?!”

“Katie for one. I should’ve never shown her those pictures...” She sighed and waited until she found a parking lot before beginning to pull into it.

“Other than that, it was... I don’t know,” Leo admitted, staring out the window. “Crazy...”

He had never even imagined that something like this could be real. Rambley was perfect, he was just like his cartoon counterpart. He was cute in a fussy sort of way. Much less annoying than the version presented in some of his favorite movies, and clearly was the security guard. After spending a few minutes with him Leo was able to tell that it was the same guy behind the screen as across the table.

Shame that none of the others made it out... Crazy that he could’ve seen them all when he was a kid and just didn’t get a chance to. So close and yet so far.

...Wait, what were they doing?

“Why are we stopping?”

“I’ve got to call Katie and clear this up now. I don’t want her pulling a me and sneaking over there,” Laura explained. She got her cellphone out and began to dial. “I’ll be quick!”

Leo pointedly looked at his wrist.

“You don’t even have a watch. Don’t start.”

Leo grinned and slouched into the passenger seat.

“Hiiii, Katie. It’s me. Sorry I couldn’t meet up earlier. It’s been a long day,” Laura said in a cheery tone. “What’re you up to?”

Katie said something. Laura furrowed her brows.

“Where?” A pause. “No, come on. I don’t want to! Ah... At the movies?... Out at that place that has the gourmet cheesecake?... Okay, just tell me! And it better be good.”

Katie told her. Laura's face might've blanched. Her smile became a flat, tight line as she stared dead ahead. She blinked, paused, and then reacted.

"Wait, WHERE are you?" she repeated. "You're kidding. You're not serious, you're screwing with me."

"What?" Leo asked.

"Oh my God. Don't move! I'm on my way, don't go anywhere, DON'T MOVE!"

Laura hung up the call and peeled out of the parking lot in a messy U-turn, even driving over the curb causing it to bounce. Leo all but thumping into the door.

"Whoa, whoa, what's going on?!"

"What do you think's going on?! She and Daryl headed out to Indigo Park! They're there RIGHT NOW!"

“With the feral animals?” Leo choked out.

“Not yet! But we’re going to have to go get Ed and get over there before they do!”

And she didn’t have to clarify, Leo knew there was no chance that he was getting out of this unless he decided to crash at Ed’s until they got back. Possibly subjected for hours of Connect Four.

...What the hell. Maybe he’d see Lloyd. Even if he really, really didn’t want to. Ed had been in a good mood recently, but he hadn’t been meeting up with his friends as much as usual.

He said he was busy, and it had worried Katie a little. So, they dropped in for a visit and, lo and behold, he was fine. Didn’t seem overworked at all, more talkative than usual- usually Ed was more of a listener, but he was chattier now instead of fading into the background. Almost seemed like he was trying a little too hard but no red flags were spotted.

In short, he was fine. He had just been busy with something.

And Daryl assumed that the ‘something’ was that night guard over at Indigo Park. He hadn’t had a chance to ask, but he was pretty confident in this.

Sometime before they met up, Leo pointblank asked Daryl: “Think he’s been, you know, meeting up with that security guard over at the park...?”

“Oh yeah,” Daryl replied.

Both weren’t entirely certain that he was going to the park to do it either. Leo seemed to have some doubts, but Daryl couldn’t weasel out of him why he thought so. But they were both glad that Ed seemed happy.

But Daryl was a little... uneasy about this whole thing.

Not about Ed dating some random guy who he held out on the name of for an unusually long amount of

time- Randy, he finally fessed up, but Daryl was sure that was the second name he gave. Given what he knew about Ed's situation with his parents, when he just went to visit them, Daryl understood that maybe Ed didn't feel too comfortable being open about what was going on.

No, it was everything else that was suspicious.

First off, apparently Ed only exclusively met Randy at Indigo Park. That was odd, but whatever. Maybe he worked a lot. But then Randy apparently could never meet them even though Leo and Katie had both hinted at it. He must've met Laura as she shrugged it off and told Katie not to be too pushy, giving her a little push as she did.

Laura had met him, but she too had met him at the park. It was like he never left that place. Weird.

Weirder still since he wasn't there. Not a peep. Not a cartoon figure on the stage.

And there was DEFINITELY something weird about that park. If not for the fact that it spontaneously closed, and that the Halloween Party raid NEVER appeared on the news anywhere, not even online, then for the fact that Russ was still gone.

Sure, Russ had a habit of disappearing, but there was something funny about him disappearing the night they went to the park.

Needless to say, Daryl had absolutely zero interest in going back there. It was a creepy place. Sketchy as all heck.

But Katie on the other hand? Katie was growing all the more intrigued. Largely with the mysterious guy Ed kept meeting up with; she was still the type who had to meet and know everyone. She never wanted to be out of the loop, even when it was a friend's friend who just happened to be dodgy.

And then she saw that stupid picture.

Apparently, Ed and Laura had gone back to the park about a week ago and she had taken some pictures of the swamp area. Of the Haunted Castle, Katie's favorite place in the park.

Katie loved the Haunted Castle. Leo loved the Haunted Castle. Daryl didn't know anyone who didn't like the Haunted Castle- he wasn't even fond of Indigo Park and even he thought the whole castle thing looked cool. Though that could've been because of him growing up with video games that had a similar vibe. Castlevile, Undying, Brainstem 64- he even dressed like the main character for Halloween!

Katie wanted to see the castle and Daryl... he was willing to budge.

But Ed wasn't. Ed brushed them off and honestly, who could blame him? After that close call with the cops, he was probably rethinking his willingness to head back. It wouldn't be the first time Ed was arrested for trespassing after all...

Daryl was fine with ending it there, but Katie just had to suggest they sneak off there alone, while it was getting dark, entering illegally, just the two of them.

And it was the just the two of them part that twisted Daryl's arm, because he could never say no to Katie.

So, here they were, walking through Indigo Park.

It was eerily quiet too. Apparently Rambley the Raccoon didn't feel chatty tonight- or more specifically, the security guard wasn't here. Which should've made it less daunting but instead reminded him that so much as a twisted ankle would suddenly be a much bigger deal.

Katie had even called into his booth with a, "Helllooo?" and was rewarded with an eerie dead silence. Nope, no security guard. Weird.

And if that didn't spell out danger, Laura's panicked reaction when she found out they were there would've. Katie had been so excited to tell her.

“We’re somewhere...” she had said playfully.

“Guess!... Come on!... No... No... Well, if you’re sure. We’re in, get this, Indigo Park! We’re going to go see the Spooky Castle.”

And Laura’s reaction wasn’t exactly positive. In fact, it was downright panicked. So much so that Daryl could hear her frantic cries of, “DON’T MOVE!” through the phone.

“O-Okay, we’re not- we’re just walking around! We’ll be- okay, we’ll... Alright.”

Katie hung up the phone looking a little shaken by the unexpected reaction.

“She freaked,” Daryl guessed.

“A little...” Katie admitted. “She said she’s on her way.”

“Want to head out?”

“I... don’t know...” Katie mulled it over for a quiet moment. “...No. Look, we’re almost there.” She pointed towards the castle peeking over a line of stalls. “There’s no point in waiting here, right? Let’s just get there and peek around. Just in case Laura wants us to leave as soon as she gets here.”

Daryl wasn’t sure if this was a good idea, but standing out in the dark wasn’t exactly better. Just in case Leo wasn’t joking about the wild dogs.

“Sure,” he said with a small sigh. She didn’t notice, she just perked back up and they continued along.

Daryl noticed the darkened-out screen of an information kiosk as they passed it by.

“Weird that that security guard isn’t here,” he mused.

Or maybe he was there somewhere and just wasn’t saying anything. Creepy.

“Maybe he is and we just didn’t see him?” Katie guessed.

“Then where is he? He wasn’t in the check-in office, so where else?”

“Anywhere! Look at the size of this place!” She pointed around in the distance. “He could be halfway across the park and we wouldn’t know.”

“I guess that’s true.” He looked over his shoulder. “I just...”

He could’ve sworn he saw the shadows move. He whipped his flashlight back, but there was nothing there.

He inhaled deeply and slowly turned forward again.

“I’ve got this feeling like something’s watching us...”

And it only got worse the further they got in.

...

It had been literally two seconds since Rambley relaxed when there was sudden banging on the front door.

His ears lowered, he got an unenthused 'that better not be the cops' look, and promptly sprung off the couch and darted around the corner into the hallway. Leaving Ed to get up and go answer the door, which he did quickly.

He yanked it open to see Laura. "What-?"

"Get Rambley and get in the car! Katie and Daryl are over in Indigo Park right now!"

"What-?!"

"I KNEW IT!" Rambley yelled from the hallway. They looked back to see him jump out of hiding. "I knew it, I KNEW it when I heard them asking about it that they were going to do that! At night, while I'm not there!"

"That's why we've got to go!" Laura said.

“Yeah, but-!”

Laura had turned and was running back to the stairs.

“But how am I- How am I supposed to get there?! It’s not that late, someone could see me!” Rambley cried with panicked desperation.

Ed looked around wildly before grabbing the blanket off the couch and tossing it over him. Rambley stood there plainly.

“Somehow, I don’t think this will work.”

“You’re mostly covered!”

“Eddie, look at me. You can totally see my... Oh... Oh NO!” Rambley frantically wrapped the blanket around himself and turned it into a makeshift hood as he ran for the door. “We’ve gotta go now!”

Ed noticed the change in tone. “Why?” he asked with dread.

“BATS is why!”

Right. Haunted Hollow, rabid bats.

“But they weren’t in the castle, they were in the Mind Drop.”

“And then we left a big ol’ damaged door open!”
Rambley reminded him.

Right and it was nighttime, and that was right where Katie and Daryl were heading.

Ed didn’t say another word- Laura and Rambley were already gone so there wasn’t anything to say anyways. He just grabbed his critter cuffs, shoes, keys, and followed Rambley out the door, only losing speed to lock it behind them.

Soon they were in the back seat of Laura’s car as she was speeding down the road, pushing past the speed limit once they were on the open road with

reckless abandon. To the point where Ed had to grab the door handle to feel secure.

A little faster and she'd be giving the mine cart coaster a ride for its money... as it was flying off its tracks.

After a while of silence, Rambley chimed up.

“Just for the record, I knew this was going to happen.”

“Really? Dude, why didn't you say something?” Leo cracked sarcastically.

Maybe it was because of the situation, but Ed let a snicker slip through. Rambley gave him a look and Ed smiled back, and Rambley rolled his eyes. He could see the gesture perfectly due to how well his eyes reflected light. It almost gave them the impression of glowing in low light. It was quite a sight.

Or it would've been if the speed didn't make it so looking away from the front give low-grade motion sickness. Ed looked ahead again, watching the road rush underneath them.

He couldn't tell if it was due to Laura speeding or the tenseness of the situation, but they seemed to make it to road leading to the park in record time. Laura was forced to slow down once they pulled into the woods, but she clearly wasn't wanting to and tried to pick it back up. Leading to an incredibly bumpy ride once she hit the patches of deteriorated road.

It was especially noticeable in the back. Ed could feel it rattling his jaw and Rambley felt like a shook up soda can. Even the busted up rides at the park were more smooth than this!

"Ugh, I think I'm getting sick," he mumbled.

"It's okay, Hun! We'll catch up to them!" Laura called back.

“At this speed we’re bound to crash right through them,” Ed quipped over her shoulder, sitting up between the seats so he could see the road and foresee any bumps.

Laura gawked at him. “This isn’t the time for joking around!”

“You didn’t call out Leo.”

“That’s because mine was funny,” Leo added.

“Can we PLEASE slow down a little?” Rambley called out.

“Oh, yeah, sure thing!” Laura said, changing her tune instantly. She slowed down to a fast but more reasonable degree. “Are you okay?”

Rambley was quick to cover his embarrassment.

“I’m fine! All good back here! Heh, just a little worried because the, uh, the gate sort of closes in. But you already knew that.”

“Also, we don’t know where they parked. So, with these trees like they are, we could drive right up into them,” Ed pointed out.

“Really?” Laura asked doubtfully.

“Really. I almost clipped someone when I was driving in on Halloween.”

“Huh.”

That was enough to convince her to keep the slower speed. It wasn’t helping them get there faster but at least he was less likely to bang his head on the ceiling.

Ed turned back and gave a thumbs up and a more reassuring smile. Rambley returned with an anxious one. It clearly wasn’t just the car making him nervous, and it probably wasn’t just Daryl and Katie either.

Because he wasn’t the only one who was nervous.

Ed didn't like any of this. He had told them no for a reason- maybe not a clear enough no but a no- and now here he was racing over there just like he did on Halloween.

He hadn't brought up Halloween because he didn't want to hurt Rambley's feelings, but he was still unhappy with how all of that went down. Ed wasn't one to stew about anything but that disaster had been a wakeup call. He had to be more careful. He had to keep some doors firmly shut.

Yet here he was again wishing that he had put his foot down when he had the chance.

He really hated that this was going to be Rambley's experience coming back here. He was hoping it would be for something easier or more hopeful, like coming back for Mollie. Preferably after Christmas, after he took a while off to decompress. Long enough that this whole real Rambley thing wouldn't still be looming over his head.

But no, they were already on their way back, and he couldn't tell if Rambley's unsureness was from the Katie and Daryl situation or a hesitation to return home.

Maybe Ed was overthinking it. He couldn't help it. He had been feeling protective of Rambley for a while now and this whole situation today was only making that intensify. He almost wanted to suggest that Rambley wait in the car, so that he would be certain that he'd be safe and unseen. So that he could rest and relax and not have to worry.

So that he wouldn't change his mind and return to his treehouse.

Admitting that was a hard pill to swallow, because Ed knew eventually Rambley would have to head home. But he wanted to keep him as close as he could for as long as he could.

He reached back for his hand. He had to feel around for it for a second since he was still looking ahead

and ended up grabbing his leg instead. Rambley squeaked.

“Whoops. Sorry.”

“It’s okay!” Rambley inserted his hand into his.

“Looking for this?”

“That’s it. Thanks.”

“Ehehe.” He squeezed his hand back.

Just holding hands in the backseat. Nothing weird about that.

Then he felt Rambley pull his hand closer and take it between both of his. He brought it to his chest and cradled it there, petting it in gentle, soothing, antsy motions. As though trying to calm himself through comforting Ed. Clever fingers tracing designs along his own.

Ed looked back to see him looking out the window and worrying his lip with his teeth.

Their eyes met. Rambley caught him staring red-handed, still biting his lip. The corner of his mouth twitched up and he raised a hand in a tiny wave.

That pleasant warmth rippled through Ed's body, loosening up some of the tenseness in his shoulders.

He was going to protect this little guy with his life for all his life, no doubt about it.

Nobody was going to hurt him anymore; Ed would make sure of it.

And he turned back towards the road just in time for Laura to hit that one really bad pothole and thump his head on the roof.

"Geez, Ed! Put your seatbelt on!" she scolded.

"Good idea," he muttered, rubbing his head.

Rambley must've agreed as he gave his arm a firm tug and Ed plopped back down. Though he wasn't even through putting his seatbelt on when they ended up arriving at their destination.

"Aaand there's the car!" Laura announced.

Sure enough, Daryl's car was parked on the side of the road. It was further from where Ed or Laura tended to park. As they drove by the three humans tried to look in while the one raccoon ducked for cover.

As they dreaded but expected, the car was empty, meaning that Daryl and Katie were still somewhere inside of Indigo Park.

They pulled up closer to the main gate and got out before heading inside. Laura leading the way in a storming stride, Leo shortly behind her, and Ed falling back to accompany Rambley who had slowed down significantly so he could hook back into the system and start checking the cameras.

His hand was on his head and his eyes were unfocused, but he soon got a pursed frown on his face.

“What do you see?” Ed asked.

“Nothing, and that’s the problem,” Rambley mumbled. He sighed and pulled out of the cameras. “They got further than I hoped. Or at least past the cameras I can reach from here. At this rate they might already BE at the castle.”

“And that’s bad,” Ed said.

Rambley gave him a confused look.

“I mean it. That’s bad,” Ed clarified.

“Right, that’s bad,” Rambley said with a teasing little smile. “Thanks for telling me. I wouldn’t have known otherwise.”

Ed gave a partial laugh, one that he stifled once it almost became real when Rambley broke into a

sudden jog after Laura, who had gotten some distance from them. Ed caught up quickly too.

Soon they were heading past the fountain. Still as clean as they left it, the statue on top still spinning and spitting water like nothing had changed.

For Rambley, at least, it was a little assuring. A sign that the park wouldn't fully collapse if he left for a while. Or that the progress they had made wouldn't revert overnight.

He hugged Ed's sweater to himself- he was glad he hadn't had time to change because it helped cut back the chill in the air- and looked over to see the others regrouping. That is, Ed stopping them long enough to get out his Critter Cuff. He had already put the Royal Rangler one on his wrist in the car.

"I've got two Critter Cuffs. I'll take the Royal Rangler cuff, since it opens more doors. One of you can take my Rookie Rangler cuff," Ed suggested.

He held it out between them questioningly before Laura held out her hand and he hooked it on for her.

“Leo, if we get split up you’ve got to stay with one of us,” Ed warned.

“What’s the chances of that happening? I don’t even really want to be here with the dogs and the lions,” Leo said.

“You’d be surprised,” Ed admitted.

“And I thought you liked that big, dumb lion,” Rambley added teasingly, trying to lighten the mood. “Those Critter Cuffs will keep you safe from both of those and more. So, stay close!”

“And if you want, I have mace,” Laura offered. She unzipped and dug into her purse. “But I don’t think it’s going to work.”

“Don’t even bother. Nothing short of blast of napalm would put that guy down,” Rambley said dryly, side-eyeing the theater. “We’ll be out of his territory

in no time once we board the tram so he's the least of our problems. Worry about the wild dog and the two criminals trespassing on private property."

"Do you think they took the train?" Laura asked.

"No, but we sure will! It's the quickest way over there. And aren't you lucky, Leo? You're going to get a free ride! No entry fee required."

"Yeahhh, great," Leo said with a very phoned in smile.

"It's cool," Ed assured.

"You sure?"

"It's smooth."

"It's the smoothest ride in the park! Smoother than our ride in, that's for sure," Rambley said behind his hand. He noticeably glanced at Laura with a teasing look, seemingly trying to joke with her.

She didn't notice, instead pulling out her phone and trying to text Katie. Rambley frowned a little and cleared his throat and turned his attention elsewhere.

He was a little surprised by Leo's trepidation on that front considering he was willing to walk around the entire park and down the tracks of his railroad before, but he supposed he had the right to be nervous. At least Ed was there to back him up.

Or maybe it was just easier to listen to Rambley when he was in clear control of the park. Which he was!... But it was easier to get a visual representation of that when he was a cartoon hopping from screen to screen with ease.

And come to think of it, that's what he was going to have to do if he was going to play the role of security guard and get Katie and Daryl out of the park. Back to admin mode!

...Though he couldn't effectively manage the screens in a sweater and nothing else. He would

have to get his spare green suit from back at his treehouse since he left the good one at Ed's. Ugh, the one thing he should've grabbed- he could've got dressed in the car!

No use crying over spilled milk now. Instead, he did his best to keep up with Laura, who was growing increasingly concerned and frustrated as she received no answer, as they headed to the tram.

It didn't take them long to arrive, and they started to climb aboard. Except for Rambley. Ed noticed right away and looked back expectantly but Rambley waved him on.

"You go on ahead. I have something I need to do."

"Rambley, we sort of need you-," Laura started.

"No, it's okay. I have the Royal Rangler cuff, and I know where we're going. I can take care of it," Ed offered. Assuming that Rambley was getting cold feet he added, "You can head back and wait in the car if you want. So, you don't risk getting seen."

“You don’t need me?” Rambley asked with big, sad eyes that were clearly fake.

“Only every minute of every day, but I can handle it if you want to take a load off,” Eddie replied.

“Don’t you worry about me. This is what I was born to do! But to do that, I really need to go get my- Oh... That was actually very sweet, Eddie. Almost flew right over my head!” Rambley gave a flustered giggle before coughing and recovering. “*ahem* But what I was saying is that I need to go get my green suit so I can work the screens properly. I’ll turn on the tram for you, get my suit, bring the tram back, hop aboard, and meet you over there!”

“We can wait,” Ed offered.

“We can’t wait,” Laura reminded. She turned back to Rambley. “Are you sure you need it? I thought that just did your animations.”

“You would think, but it’s really a lot more complicated than that.” ‘

She was right. It did only control the animations, allowing him to express his virtual self more freely. However, he focused better when he knew he was fully suited up and in character, and he would need full brain power and no distractions for a situation this dire.

Imagine if he got distracted and the bats showed up!

...Yikes, imagine if the bats showed up at all. He could only hope the nearby streetlamp was keeping those guys in the coaster warehouse.

“But there’s no time to explain. I’ll be fine! Go on ahead,” Rambley encouraged, making a shooing motion.

“Rambley...” Ed said unsurely.

“Eddie, I can handle myself. I did it for eight years, I think I can manage eight minutes,” Rambley said with a teasing smile. He continued to shoo him.

That put Ed in his place. Right, Rambley had been here for years alone. Literally nothing had changed. He would be fine.

Ed gave him a thumbs up and sat down, squeezing into the same seat as Laura and Leo. None of them wanted to ride alone. If not to cut down on windchill then for safety purposes. Not that Ed expected any of them to get picked off on a moving train but he rather not take the risk.

The tram started and pulled out of the station. Rambley waved vigorously and Ed waved back and watched as the raccoon ran off into the park.

He was going to be fine.

He knew how to handle himself, especially on this side of the park. He was just heading to his house.

Besides, the bats almost ate him last time. Ed almost forgot how they cornered him until now. It was best if he stayed away.

The Other Rambley was on the other side of the park. He didn't even know they were here. It was going to be fine.

Ed's leg was already bouncing a little bit. It was crazy, he should've been more worried about Daryl and Katie than Rambley. They were the ones in danger; he had to get his act together. Deep breath, focus, and go find them. The sooner they did, the sooner they could get back home.

And Leo, who had been eyeing Ed, gave a somewhat perplexed, "I think I just figured something out."

"Yeah. Don't trust Katie with anything," Laura mumbled. She crossed her arms pointedly.

"What?" Ed asked.

“Nothing!” Leo quickly looked away.

“Thank GOD I didn’t accidentally show her a picture of Salem,” Laura continued to vent.

“...WHAT Salem?” Leo asked quietly.

“The, ugh, y’know!” Laura fumbled.

“The skunk,” Ed clarified.

Leo tossed a hand up and turned away, deciding then that he didn’t want any more clarification.

Which was good, because Laura didn’t feel like giving it and Ed knew he needed to keep his focus outside of the tram and his eyes out for any danger.

The Haunted Castle loomed in the distance. Its lights were still on. Beckoning them in.

Bats weren’t attracted to light, right...?

...

Haunted Hollow seemed surprisingly welcoming. Daryl expected it to be as dark as the rest of the park, but many of the lights were on, even in a place themed to be dark and spooky.

Katie was in awe. Gasping as she squeezed through the gate and started to walk through the open courtyard. Daryl kept the gate open behind them for when and if Laura arrived and followed behind her with his hands in his pockets. Looking around with less excitement but it still felt like a blast to the past.

They looked around at the sparse stalls and outdoor decorations as they inched towards the Haunted Castle's entrance. Katie kept moving along with Daryl dragging his feet behind.

The way into the Haunted Castle was wide open once they found it and they walked into the short waiting kiosk and through the hallway to the boarding area.

The spooky staircase, the old paintings, it was all the same. Even the ghostly bride-like prop standing on the stairs by the window was just as it was remembered, save the surplus of cobwebs.

Katie was in awe. Her mouth open in a silent, prolonged gasp as she aimed her cellphone around the room to record every detail. It was like stepping into a fixture of the past and to her was all the validation in the world that the Indigo Park she had seen was still there.

Daryl was just creeped out, and it wasn't because of all the spooky decorations. There was just a weird feel to the room that he couldn't put his finger on.

"Let's get some pictures up by the bride!" Katie suggested.

And as usual, he couldn't say no to her.

But as Katie started to head towards the carts to cross over to the other side of the tracks, there came a cackle over the loudspeaker. She jumped and

flailed and stepped back quickly as though something jumped out at her. Daryl smirked a little even though he had jumped too.

An automated voice came over the intercom, and surprisingly it wasn't Rambley the Raccoon's. It was instead the voice of one of the members of the Battums family- made very clear by the exaggerated accent.

“Vell, hello, hello! Velcome to the Battum's Family's Vonderfully Haunted Castle! Enter at your own risk...”

“Wait, it's still working?!” Katie said. “Ohhh my goodness...!”

There was a buzz from somewhere above before the carts wheeled a little further onto the tracks. Once lined up perfectly in the boarding area their lap bars pulled forward to let any riders get inside.

“Ze ride is now boarding. Keep hands and feet, and fangs, inside the cart at all times. And try to not get spooked! Vahaha!”

“The ride’s still working.” Katie looked back at Daryl in shock. “We can ride the ride!”

“What.”

“Yeah, let’s try it!” She broke into an eager smile and turned and was almost immediately pulled back by Daryl grabbing her arm.

“Hey, wait. This?” He pointed at the ride. “Bad idea.”

“I know, but it’s...”

“A BAD idea.”

“Ze next spooky ride begins in only TWO MINUTES, bahaha! Come inside and explore ze nooks and crannies of my delightfully batty family!” the overhead recording recited. “And vhy not stop at our fang-tastic gift shop? Or even try out our

blood-curdling, award-winning ride Mineshaft Drop!
Line times are estimated at: no wait.”

Daryl could see the look on Katie’s face. She was still considering it, much to his growing unease. He gave her arm the smallest little shake to get her eyes back on him.

“An old ride in a broken-down amusement park that hasn’t ran in, what, ten years?” he clarified.

“I know, but... but Ed said the rides were working. Rambley’s Railroad, the ferris wheel, that spinning thingie-.”

“When Ed’s not breaking the law sneaking into abandoned buildings, he’s climbing stuff and almost falling off. His job is literally to do stupid stuff for views. I don’t take him as a sane source of information.”

“But I think Laura said they rode this... maybe?”

“Maybe?”

“Can’t we just try it?” Katie clasped her hands together pleadingly. “There’s so many places where we can just get off if the ride stops. We don’t even have to go down the drop, I just want to see the castle again. We could- We don’t have to even ride the ride, we could just walk through!”

“Whoa, let’s not go crazy,” Daryl interjected.

Sure, he didn’t want to get on an old ride, but walking along beside a still functioning ride seemed just as if not more dangerous. If they fell into anything there wasn’t any ambulance in the world fast enough to get to them before they got ground up or electrocuted. It would be a death sentence.

But riding this thing? This old, rundown ride?

He looked around at it with an exhausted sigh.

...It wasn’t Laura. Ed said he rode it, hadn’t he? It was one of those quick details he slipped up with before changing subject, like that time Randy

became Rudy and somehow nobody noticed but him. Ed rode the Haunted Castle ride and was fine, and despite what Daryl said... he didn't trust Ed's judgement all that much, but he knew the guy wouldn't lie. He told them about the snakes and the dogs. He knew there was danger here.

There was no way this could be safe. Daryl knew this, and he knew it didn't matter whether they walked or rode through. Either way they were playing with fire. He had to say no.

But it had to be Katie. It had to be him alone with Katie.

And unfortunately, unaware to him, Katie was aware of this. At least, she knew that Daryl tended to budge on issues, and she could tell from his extended silence that he was torn. She gave him one more firm nudge.

"We can always climb off?" she tried with a tiny smile.

They could always climb off. That wasn't assuring at all.

Yet the next thing he knew, Daryl was in that cart. His stomach lurching as it started to move along.

The cart climbed up the fake staircase and into a pitch-dark passage. The boom of fake thunder shook the car and was followed with the chitter chatter of bats and then the soft melody of a piano as they passed into the conservatory.

The father of the Battums Family, Count Battamir Battum, looked significantly dustier than he had in his heyday but the animatronic still spoke and moved with surprising familiarity.

"The creatures of the night! Vat beautiful music they make! Ah, velcome! Velcome to our home. I am Count Battamir Battum, and zis is our haunted castle! Explore if you vish, but be careful! Who knows vat may lurk in these walls..."

Katie was eating it up. She snuck and took a picture, stealthily as though afraid of getting caught. Daryl didn't know why she would be, they both knew Ed's little friend wasn't going to do anything now if he hadn't for the Halloween party. Unless their friend group's theory was true and he WAS the one who called the cops.

He wondered if that guy was watching them now. He looked around and spotted a camera up in the corner as they edged out of the room. It was steadily following them.

The next room was the kitchen. Decorated in 1950s themed furniture and fixtures down to the southern drawled matriarch. Batherine O'Battum, one of the most popular characters of the Battums Family. Likely not because of her perfectly motherly personality and more to her exceptionally motherly physique.

"Well hey there, Sugar! I'm Batherine O'Battum, the matron of the family. Would you like a glass of warm blood? It's fresh from the cow!"

Right, there was a cow too. Daryl couldn't remember its name.

Katie remembered that she was Moohilda and despite being a cow, she was a lot smarter than she seemed. In the old cartoon episodes, she would often help in fixing problems that the family themselves couldn't, such as misunderstandings and bad guys looking to trick the family members.

She used to have a plastic playset featuring figures of the whole family and would have Moohilda and Bathory team up to solve mysteries together. She almost told Daryl about that but at the last second she stopped herself. He probably wouldn't care, or think it was stupid.

She was pretty sure he thought a lot of things were stupid.

"Watch your step on the landing and watch out for the little ones! They get mighty mischievous when they're hungry!"

Up unto the dark hallway and to the twins. Very popular characters they were. So popular, in fact, that in the Sunset Studios releases they had practically become the main characters.

It was almost jarring to see these old designs where they looked nearly entirely identical as opposed to their later versions that were much more dramatic in separating them as the gothic girl and the ghoul boy. They were designs that looked a lot better on merchandise AND the big screen.

Neither Daryl nor Katie cared much about the change.

“Come play with us. Come play with us. Let’s play... hide and seek! Ehehehehe!”

Now they wound up in a beautiful bedroom and Katie immediately perked up. She knew who was coming next, the elegant and melodic Bathory.

Bathory had always been her favorite. Not just because of the pretty dresses and princess-like demeanor either. Sure, she was a little ditzy at times and was usually getting tricked, but to Katie Bathory was more than that. She was smarter than she seemed, kind as could be, even to the villains who fawned over her, and cared about her family so much.

Sure, she was a little materialistic at times. Maybe the later movies made her seem more like a spoiled priss than a darling lady, but Katie still had a soft spot for the character. She admired her in a way. Everyone thought she was just a pretty face but there was so much underneath.

Daryl thought she was the most annoying character.

“Oh, it’s such a beautiful night! Won’t you sing with us?”

And that was probably because Katie never told him how much she liked her.

“Hello, my friends! And hello to you too. I am Bathory, the songstress. Come sing with me again someday! Oh, and watch out for my brother! I think he’s up to something...”

Because she knew that he would probably think she was annoying too if she didn’t have a pretty face.

So, she didn’t say anything. She just took her pictures and kept her feelings to herself and soon they rolled on. Out of the bedroom and into the library, and through fog that made Daryl cough and Katie scrunch up her nose.

Then it was into the dark laboratory. The cart circled around a table in the center that looked to be recreating a scene from Frankenstein with a robotic cow and Battholemew, the eldest son and the mad scientist of the Battums family. Often mistaken as an uncle because he was an adult despite the fact that it was regularly mentioned. Though that could’ve been because he was often overlooked.

The Tesla coils flickered briefly as the animatronic stiffly rose its arms and lowered them again.

“I am ze great scientist Battholemew Battum. And ve shall never go hungry again.”

The cart rolled onward to the exit, rapidly approaching the climb that would lead into the drop that Daryl had been dreading since he had got on.

Was he really about to let them do this? It was so risky. They could get killed, or maimed. Wish they were killed but get stuck somewhere with broken legs and no way to get out.

Yet there was a part of him that was... kind of excited to do it. And not just for Katie, for himself. A buzzy thrill that he hadn't felt in a long time.

A dull life had taken a lot of fire out of his belly. A long time ago he wanted to work at a place just like this, or make video games, or do something fun with his life. He used to love stuff like this, horror stories about average joes taking on the monster of the

week and winning. Then he wound up an average joe at an average job.

No wonder Katie didn't take him seriously.

This wasn't going to fix any of his problems, but... maybe it was time he started to take a few more chances. And because of that, he made no attempt to get up or get out as the cart started to climb the hill.

This was it.

And then...

BUZZT!

The same buzzer as before echoed out from somewhere in the floor before the music but off. There were a few more noises, a clatter and clink, and then a tick, tick, tick as the cart rolled back down and stopped itself at the bottom of the slope, back into the laboratory where the overhead lights had come on.

“Pardon the delay, but ze ride is experiencing some technical difficulties. Please remain seated!” the voice of Battholemew recited. Only now did Daryl recognize him as the narrator for the boarding of the ride too. Not that it mattered much now.

Unfortunately, Daryl’s premonition of the ride malfunctioning came true, though not in the way he expected. Not in a terrifying fall but in a slow roll and an eerie silence.

Katie looked something between gob smacked and heartbroken, and he didn’t feel up to any ‘I told you so’s. He fell for it too, didn’t he? Hook, line, and sinker.

“Well...” he started. “...It could’ve been on the drop.”

“At least we would’ve made it to the bottom,” Katie sighed.

“At a hundred miles an hour, possibly,” Daryl said. She looked at him and he gave her a smile to show

he was joking. “Alright, let’s get out. It looked safe enough to walk back.”

He tried to lift the lap bar to no avail. He then tried to twist himself- he wasn’t too big of a guy, he should’ve been able to contort out but... did the lap bar lock in lower? He didn’t remember it digging in like it was now.

“You try,” he said.

And she did. She turned, pressing her back to the side, and started to get her leg up between him, her, the seat, and the bar. But it became quickly apparent that she wasn’t going to slip out any further than that. Maybe if Daryl wasn’t there though even that would’ve been a huge squeeze.

But it must’ve set something off as a message came over the intercom.

“No pulling on the restraints or exiting the ride please. Zis is for your safety. Thank you.”

Daryl looked up at the cameras with squinted suspicion and quietly asked, “Randy...?” No response. “Randy!” he called louder.

But there was still no response. Maybe it was automated. It sure sounded that way but the timing of it seemed a little suspicious.

Katie was too busy still trying to get herself free and after a little more careful working, and a little desperate thrashing, it was confirmed to her that she wasn't squeezing free.

“Oh no, no, no. I think we're stuck...”

Daryl snapped his head away from the camera and back to the lap bar.

“Hold on, hold on. Let me just... OMPH!”

He gave a firm yank with all of his might and succeeded in nothing except pulling a couple of muscles. The bar was stuck tight, holding them down in their seats.

“...Okay, we’re stuck. Now we panic.”

“Let’s not panic.”

“Does anyone know we’re here?” Daryl asked. His voice becoming more strained.

“I... Laura does! And she’s already on her way. I’ll call her!”

Since Katie hadn’t deposited her things like she might’ve if the ride was properly operating, she still had her bag, and she fished out her phone and attempted to call Laura. It didn’t go through. She tried to text her too, thinking that might, but no. There was no service whatsoever.

“Well... Well, she’s coming anyway! A-And she knew we were coming here, so... We just have to wait,” she said.

Daryl slumped over the bar.

“It’ll be fine. Let’s just... enjoy the atmosphere!” Katie gestured around at the room. “We don’t usually get to see it lit up like this. That’s... That’s neat...”

By now she was definitely feeling like she had messed up. She knew she did and sunk down into her seat, rubbing her arms to try and get some of the chill off. Only now that they stopped could she really notice how cold it was here.

Daryl took notice. He straightened up and started to unzip his jacket with slightly shaking hands. She stopped him.

“No, I’m okay! I’m okay. You need that more than I do.”

He let his arms drop back into his lap. They sat there for a long few moments, waiting.

Until the lights went out. It was close to pitch darkness in the room, save the single distant red dot on the camera, but only lasted for a few seconds as Katie whipped her phone up and turned the flashlight

on to illuminate the area around them. It was still unsettlingly dark.

They shuffled closer together. Funny, part of the reason he came here was for a moment like this, where they'd get to be this close. Had he actually considered what would have to happen to get that way he might've not been so intrigued by the prospect. Even now it wasn't anywhere near a tender moment.

He held her hand. She squeezed back. They waited.

The only sound being their breathing and the occasional tap or groan from the building.

...

...

And sound of faint chirping. The gate leading into Haunted Hollow was open.

Ed wasn't sure why that set off so many alarm bells in his head, but it did. Even though it was obvious that it was just from Katie and Daryl passing through. Maybe because they got in so easily.

Ed passed through and continued following Laura who had all but blazed through and was striding towards the castle. Leo didn't. Leo was staying close to Ed and his Royal Rangler cuff, stopping when he did and keeping up on his heels when he started moving again. Ed was fine with that and quick to catch up with Laura. Odds are they'd be safer in a group.

They headed right inside. Leo looked around with a mix of nostalgia and paranoia while Laura kept her eyes ahead and strode into the boarding station. She stopped there and looked around at the track, perhaps noticing as Ed did that there were no carts. Probably wondering if they were supposed to be there.

Ed, knowing good and well that they probably should've been, assumed that the reasons they were gone was Katie and Daryl.

"Isn't there usually...?" Laura pointed around.

"Yup," Ed replied.

Laura threw her head back with a frustrated huff before whipping it forward again, then turning to walk off again.

"We're going to the gift shop," she said.

"You think they're there?" Leo asked with confusion.

"No, I think they're whipping around up there," she said, pointing towards the inclining track and then up towards the ceiling and around in loops. "But eventually they're coming off and the ride lets off by the gift shop. We'll ambush them in there."

"Oh, okay. Makes sense... Are we totally sure they'll make it off the ride? I mean, down here?" Leo asked.

He pointed at the floor. “Not up there?” He pointed up.

“No, the ride’s working fine. I rode it with Rambley the last time we came. Even the drop was good,” Ed explained.

Leo cracked a smirk.

“Ehh, so that’s what you’ve been doing over here? Riding rides and playing games with Rambley the Raccoon?” he asked teasingly.

“That’s right. That and a little maintenance work here and there. Cleaned the fountain out too,” Ed explained.

“...That fountain did not look clean.”

“The one on main street, not here.”

“That one looked a little better. But I don’t think I’d drink out of it.”

“I wouldn’t drink anything out of the vending machines either. A lot of this stuff is really expired,” Ed warned. “Rambley’s got some Bird Up syrup but, uh... Don’t let him make you a drink.”

“Why not?”

“Just trust me on it.”

“Okay, but really. Why not?”

“Because he mixes soda syrup with water and it doesn’t taste exactly how it sounds.”

Leo snickered for a second- or scoffed, he made some sort of noise. Ed was just glad to get a second of levity.

In fact, he was actually feeling pretty alright right now. No sign of the bats, probably because the lights inside of the ride were still on, and a confirmation that Daryl and Katie were on the ride, which had been working when he rode it. All they had to do was

wait until they rolled in to the exit and catch them before they slipped away.

Or at least, that was the plan, and that seemed like a pretty good plan while they were hanging out in the gift shop. Laura trying stubbornly to not look at the stuff and wait by the door, Leo looking around with his hands in his pockets, and Ed trying to pass the time without doing much of anything.

He looked up at the screen in the corner. It was showing a screensaver of one of the Battums Family members' face. Every once in a while playing an audio track-

“Vhy not ride ze Mineshaft Drop? Repeat riders vill be allowed to skip ze line!”

Tempting, Ed thought sarcastically.

Rambley's absence could be felt in moments like this. These times when they were standing around waiting for something and his voice didn't chime in with a fun fact or a quip about his current location in

the park. Sure, he could do this without Rambley, but did he really want to?

Hopefully he got there before the bats did. Royal Rangler cuff or not, Ed wasn't sure if it would work without Rambley there to set it off. His bright-eyed and bushy-tailed guardian angel.

...

Gee, the ride was taking an awful long time, wasn't it?

Ed walked past Laura into the unloading area and walked over to the tunnel leading in, looking inside and listening carefully for any sign of a coming cart. It was eerily quiet and equally dark.

He could hear the others walking up behind him but continued listening, and they stayed silent as he did. He couldn't hear them at all, save some sort of squeaking noise. Maybe the wheels of the cart? Couldn't be bats, that would be louder. That probably

wouldn't be squeaks. Whatever it was, it wasn't coming closer.

And neither was Daryl and Katie.

"I... don't think the ride's going," Ed finally admitted.

"Sooo, they're somewhere else?" Leo asked.

"I didn't say that..."

Could the carts be somewhere else?... No, they either had to be here or in the front room. The connecting point was so close that Ed could've practically looked through.

Besides, knowing his luck they had to be somewhere up there... and heaven forbid, not in the Mineshaft Drop. There was only one way to make sure.

"So, they're probably stuck up there," Laura said with thinly veiled irritation. "The one time Rambley's not here to fix the ride either. What do we do, wait until

he gets here and see if he can get it moving or do we start getting our story straight for when we call 911?”

“Both, but... I’m going to walk up and see if I can find them first,” Ed said.

“Walk up?” Laura asked incredulously. She pointed in at the unseen slope. “That? I’d love to see you walk up that.”

“No, not that. The other way. You can walk alongside the cart on the other side and practically make it all the way to the top,” Ed explained. “You guys can wait here.”

“No, I’ll come with you. I want the first thing for them to see is my smug face. Or my angry face, I’ll figure out how I feel when I get there,” Laura said. She turned to Leo. “You can wait in the gift shop if you want. It’s pretty safe indoors.”

Ed almost disagreed but stopped himself, because the gift shop was the most lit up place in this section of the park. It probably WAS safe.

But Leo didn't seem interested in the slightest.

"There's no way. We stick together, right?" he insisted.

"Right, that's safest. Alright, let's go," Laura agreed.

"And if we do split up," Leo continued, planting his hands to his chest. "I'M not the one who's staying behind. Rambley's orders."

"Okay, okay. I get it," Laura tsked. "Let's just get up there."

So, they did. They walked back to the other side and Ed led the way up the tunnel, walking along the side where a walkway was set up for repair work.

It was hard to see in the dark, Ed had to use the flashlight he borrowed from Laura see it at all, but it

was sturdy. He pushed through that darkness quickly and only released his breath once he entered the first lit room, the conservatory.

There was plenty of room to walk around without getting too close to the track or the animatronic, so they were able to easily push forward.

As they neared the sole downward slope leading into the laboratory section, Ed heard a clunk from somewhere ahead. It sounded like something opening and he shined the light ahead to see the entranceway into the fake lab. Weirdly, and concerning, it was dark inside. Though there was a glow like from a flashlight on the other side of the room.

He shined his light further inside. It was seen by someone else.

“Hello? Is somebody there?” a voice called.

It was Katie.

“Hey, it’s us!” Ed called back. “Are you okay in there?”

“Yes, we’re just stuck!”

“The ride stopped,” Daryl called back. “Is Laura with you?”

“You bet I am!” Laura called over Ed’s shoulder.

He sidled ahead and through the opening, then shined the light back so that the other two to see to get through. Laura cautiously stepped into the room and then thumped her way across the room. Ed caught on and lit the way for her, leading her all the way over to the cart- and then grabbing Leo’s arm to stop him from falling when he stumbled in the dark.

“You see, THIS is exactly why I said you shouldn’t come here alone!” Laura continued, eyes squinting in the bright glow from Katie’s cellphone light before it was lowered.

Daryl shrugged, as she expected. She knew exactly why he was here. So, she looked towards Katie instead, watching her shoulders sink.

“...We messed up. I messed up,” Katie admitted sheepishly. “But in my defense, Ed comes here all the time?”

“Yeah, but he’s crazy,” Laura said.

“Yeah,” Ed agreed.

“Why’d you just sit here? You could’ve just walked back through the rooms. It wasn’t that hard,” Leo chimed up.

“We would’ve loved to, but-.” Daryl shook the stuck lap bar. “We’re kind of pinned down.”

“Wait, you’re stuck?” Laura said, frustration switching to concern.

Ed reached down to try the bar himself, giving it a firm shake and then pulling with all his might. It didn’t

budge even the slightest bit. It wasn't just left in place; it was stuck tight.

"They're really stuck," he said.

"No, really?" Daryl said.

"Ed's got like twice the bicep mass as you. His 'stuck' is on a completely different level than your stuck. Here, let me try," Leo said. He came around and instead of shaking the bar, he brought his foot up and kicked down on it. "It's stuck alright."

Daryl gave him a look between confused and appalled. "It sure is now."

"Ohhhh God. Okay. This just got a lot worse," Laura said. There was creeping anxiousness in her voice but she kept her cool, looking to Ed. "Do you think it's because the power's off in here?"

"Probably. Maybe it just locks in when it loses power. You know, for safety purposes?" Ed guessed.

“Maybe... There was an alert message saying there was technical difficulties,” Katie explained.

“Which is just great,” Daryl muttered.

“But there’s electricity in the other rooms, right? What do I mean right, we just walked through there,” Laura said. She looked to Ed again, pointing.

“Maybe Rodney-... Ro..ddy?” she fumbled.

“Randy,” Ed said.

“Right! Maybe Randy could get this open?”

“I don’t see how he couldn’t. Problem is he’s not, you know, HERE yet.”

“We didn’t see him at all coming in,” Daryl said. A touch of audible suspicion was in his voice.

“He’s on his way. I called him on the, uh, way.”

Ed made a mental note to try and not make it sound like he was lying when he was almost telling the truth.

“As a matter of fact, maybe I’ll go outside and wait for him to show up. So, he knows what’s going on.”

“Good idea!” Laura agreed.

“You sure we shouldn’t call, like, 911?” Katie suggested. “I mean, I would’ve but I don’t have service...”

“It’s not really an emergency yet,” Leo shrugged off.

“We’re stuck in here,” Daryl deadpanned.

“It’s not like they’re going to be able to get you out without Randy anyways. Just let him take a whack at it. He doesn’t have to be in here to do it, right?” He gave Ed a look.

“Nope! There’s a generator out in that other building and some other stuff- It’s fine. He’ll handle it. You two just sit tight,” Ed said.

He punctuated this by reaching over the back of the cart and giving both Katie and Daryl a quick pat on the shoulder each with his free hand. Katie even patted his hand back.

Then Ed turned and started to head back towards the opening into the tunnel. Laura followed right behind him.

“Thank you for coming so fast...!” Katie called after them. Her voice meek and embarrassed, losing most of its excitement that it had from the phone call.

“It’s okay! We’ll get you out of here,” Laura called back. She lowered her voice to ask. “Think Randy will get them out?”

“Sure! And if he doesn’t, we’ve got Roddy to fall back on.” Laura gave him a little punch in the arm,

but he still continued with, “Rodney if we’re really desperate.”

“Whatever, he’s not my boyfriend.”

“He’s not mine either! Our relationship is complex. It’s a rivalry between a super-cool trespasser looking to uncover the mysteries of the park and the difficult and fussy but well-meaning security guard trying to keep me out.”

“Oh please. He didn’t try to keep you out for a second.”

“Randy didn’t, but Roddy did.”

“Ugh, shut up.”

They headed into the tunnel and got to the next source of light before Ed handed back the flashlight.

“Here.”

“You want me to go first?”

“No, I want you to wait here with them. Just in case something gets in you’ll have the flashlight and the Critter Cuff to push ‘em back.”

Laura arched a brow. “You mean the bats?”

“Shh, yes,” he hushed her swiftly. “I don’t want them to freak out. The bats might still be over in the mineshaft anyways but having it dark in here is a recipe for trouble.”

“Will a flashlight even work on them?”

“It did last time. Kept them off Randy’s tail.”

Laura’s mouth wrinkled. She didn’t seem entirely enthused about sitting around waiting while Ed went off to save the day, but he did have a point. And making a show of taking off the cuff and handing it to Leo, along with their only working flashlight, AND having to pull him aside and explain the situation and how Katie and Daryl’s safety was all on him-

Well, if Daryl wasn't suspicious already that certainly would've raised some eyebrows. Laura didn't really care much about his suspicions anyway. She was much more worried about how Leo would do under pressure. If it was anything like how she handled her first encounter with Lloyd... it was probably best if he didn't have to handle it alone.

Not that she was excited at the prospect of bats. And that was: giant, aggressive bats that were possibly rabid and almost definitely starving.

Ed noticed Laura's silent unease. He couldn't blame her, but he knew it would worry her even more if he told her he was trying to protect her by leaving her here. He could be a lot less careful if he was on his own, and just being alone would be. Still, he assured her.

"It'll be okay. I'll be quick. You've got this," Ed said, pointing at himself and then her.

Laura sighed. "Will YOU be okay?"

“Sure! I’ve been through a lot scarier places than this.”

She crossed her arms, the light bouncing as she did. “That doesn’t make me feel better.”

“Me neither but I’m still going.” Ed shot her a semi-confident smile and turned to go. “I’ll try to get in touch with you-know-who.”

“Please do!”

She stayed there and watched him until he got out of sight. He could tell from the glow of the flashlight shining after him, until it was gone and by then he got his phone out and used its light to guide his way back.

Maybe he was wrong, but he was under the impression that the flashlight- with its stronger and more focused beam of light- would be more effective on the bats. At least, he knew it worked on them last time. The cellphone lights were pretty bright as well

but something in him felt a lot more secure with the physical flashlight than his flat phone.

Which is why it needed to stay back with them. With his stuck friends. Just in case.

He would have to make do on his own.

But he didn't have to long. On his way out of the Haunted Castle, planning to head right in the direction of the generator he once turned on, he heard a voice calling in the distance.

“HELLLOOOO! HEY! HEY!”

“Rambley...?”

He snapped his head in the direction of the voice, towards the front gate, and then began to run in that direction. Thinking for a second that Rambley's yells were cries for help, despite the lack of panic in his voice. But he soon realized that wasn't the case.

Because what he ran up on wasn't his green spandex suit wearing buddy, but his cartoon reflection lit up on the screen of the information box.

Rambley seemed to lean in and peek around as he heard the attached microphones pick up footsteps and then perked up with a bright smile when Ed jogged into view of the closest camera.

"Eddie! Oh, thank goodness," he said. He wiped his brow. "Whew! I knew I was risking luring Barlow or the bats over here... Hmm, that actually wouldn't be such a bad idea. Keeps them away from you guys, I guess. I might have to give that a try later! But speaking of which, did you find them?"

"Yeah, up in the Haunted Castle. They got on the ride and got all the way up to the top before the whole thing shut down. Now they're stuck up there. Think we can start it back up?"

"The ride shut down? And it didn't automatically roll them back to the station?" Rambley asked in shock. His smile dropping and eyes widening.

“No, and they’re pinned under the lap bar. They’re stuck up in the lab room before the big drop.”

“Well, at least it’s not ON the drop...” Rambley mumbled. He tapped his chin thoughtfully. “That is strange though... but it explains why I can’t get into the system. I’m totally blocked out! That’s why I was just out here screaming instead of, you know, heh, being inside there with you,” he explained with an apologetic smile.

That was weird but it made enough sense. Look at all the places he had to scout out before Rambley could utilize them correctly. If it was off the grid, it was out of Rambley’s reach. Speaking of-

“That’s weird but I guess it makes sense. But hey, where are you? Are you nearby?”

“I’m over by the tram. I can hop the fence if you need me to, but if I’m not able to access the system from here then I can’t there either,” Rambley explained. He hummed thoughtfully. “My best guess is that

there might've been some sort of failure with the power system. Are the lights still on? It looks like it from what I can see."

"All except the ones in the room they're in."

"Oh... *sigh* Sounds like a power failure alright. And maybe that tipped security protocols. Guess we're lucky it didn't happen to US when we rode it. Give me a second to brainstorm."

The cartoon Rambley got a vacant look with swirling irises as he did so. Making quick work to see what information he could access on the electrical system while Ed waited. Him looking over his shoulders more than once to make sure nothing was sneaking up on him. Even looked up once or twice.

Finally, Rambley snapped back to attention.

"Okay, so here's the plan. Turning the generator off and back on again is no good. It won't reset the security permissions keeping me out and due to the failure having locked the ride into some sort of

emergency shutdown, it won't start up again without that lockdown being reversed. And there's no easy way to get the lap bar to release without the ride in fully functioning order. It's weird that it's stuck down at all, but that's what we're dealing with."

"But you've got a plan?" Ed asked hopefully.

Rambley got a sort of begrudging and apologetic smile. "I've got good news and bad news. Which one do you want first?" He held out his fists as though asking Ed to pick one.

Ed pointed to one. "Bad news first."

"You're going on another rip-roaring Indigo Park adventure!" Rambley chirped with false excitement and a swing of his arm.

"Oh."

"But the good news is that it's going to be a short adventure!"

Rambley opened up his hands and .png files popped up above each before expanding on the screen. The one revealing a picture of a cramped security office and the other showing a map or blueprint of a floor in some building.

“So! Behind the castle is a Staff Only door that connects with the stairwell riight here!” He pointed to said stairwell. “Which leads into the maintenance level beneath Haunted Hollow. This is where the primary security office is located- over here!” He tapped another section. “Sooo...”

He dragged his finger back, leading it in a darting path along the maze of the floor, before leading right back to the stairwell.

“You just have to walk from one side to the other. And since you’re a Royal Rangler now, we don’t have to sneak a way inside or anything. The front door’s wide open to you, Buddy! And since it’s been locked up tight, there shouldn’t be any bats hiding in there. The lights are probably still on too!”

Ed couldn't say he was surprised that this was where this was going. He was a little disappointed that it wasn't as simple as turning off the generator and turning it back on, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

"You just have to get to that office and see if there's a way to turn off security permissions- just like the last time you did it. Easy as Rambleberry Pie! Think you're up to it?"

"I'll give it a shot," Ed agreed. He pointed over. "It's just around back?"

"That's right! Go around that way- Erm, umm, to the left. Go around the left. It's quicker that way."

"Got it!" Another thumbs up. "Sit tight, Buddy. I'll be back soon."

Ed turned and started to head off.

Rambley waved after him with a smile. Then he stopped. Paused. His smile disappearing as he got

an unsure look. Then a shocked one, downright frightened, sweat appearing on his forehead as he suddenly cried out-

“EDDIE, WAIT!”

Ed swung around with his fists up braced for a fight. He was almost confused when he didn't see something preparing to ambush him, just Ramsey's worried face on the screen.

The raccoon looked away ashamedly.

“Come back over here...”

Ed was understandably confused. He came right back to the information kiosk to see all Ramsey's confidence replaced with disappointment. His ears were drooped and he was unwilling to make eye contact.

That was very unusual. What could've changed that quickly?

“What’s up, Buddy?” Ed asked with gentle concern.

Rambley began to wring his hands before putting them behind his back.

“I’m sorry, I’m... I’m doing that thing again, aren’t I? That thing where I tell you it’s safe and that it’s an easy there-and-back-again trip when I don’t really know. Then you get down there, then things go south, and you get chased, and you get cornered...”

He briefly got a very concerned expression. Whatever mental image he had briefly stunning him to silence before he shook his head and those thoughts away.

“The truth is, I have no idea what’s really down there. The pictures are old, the blueprints just a map, and I can’t tell you if anything has gotten in. Not after what happened at the Mineshaft Drop... There could be bats in there. And I- I can’t SEE you so that’s means your Critter Cuff isn’t... even...”

He trailed off but the point was clear. It could be dangerous.

But even though Rambley only just realized that, Ed had already assumed that would be the case. Indigo Park hadn't let him down yet; if he was going into a place he had never been before, odds are there was going to be something there trying to kill him.

Rambley admitting that should've scared him more, but in a way it had the opposite effect. Maybe because it was honest and upfront. Or maybe because Rambley had remembered their argument and listened.

Ed hadn't been thinking about it, but Rambley had almost done the exact same thing and he stopped himself. He had listened and was making an effort.

That was... actually a huge relief. It lifted a weight that he didn't know he was carrying, making his load feel a little lighter.

But it wasn't going to stop him from going down there. If he was willing to waltz down into the labs knowing that there was probably something terrible and horrific down there- thankfully the gory failed experiments he imagined didn't jump off tables and start chasing him around- then he was willing to handle a couple of giant bats. He had a light.

"How about this? I go check and see if the lights are on. If they're on, I'll head in and find the office. If they're off, I'll come back and we'll go from there."

"Are you sure? I can come with you. You're alone, it's not like your friends will see," Rambley offered.

Ed felt a flash of protectiveness and a growing unease. "No, I can handle it. You just sit tight and keep an eye out. Watch your back."

"Oh, I've been very careful. I'm a sitting duck in this lime green number," Rambley joked, cracking a smile. "But I can come with you! It won't take me a minute to get over there."

“No, it’s cool! You just stay right there!”

Ed must’ve sounded a little too insistent as Rambley got a curious look. His eyes squinting and his tail flicking thoughtfully, and he leaned in and tapped his chin again.

“Just for curiosity’s sake, are you really afraid of your friends seeing me or is it because of the bats?”

“Bats. Hands down,” Ed confessed.

Rambley cracked a cheeky smile. His tail swishing again. “Aww, Eddie. You worry about me too much.”

“I think I worry about you just enough,” Ed said, returning his smile.

Rambley snickered and waved him off dismissively. “Says the guy offering to go down into the basement of a spooky mansion all alone!”

“Hey, I do this on the regular. I’m crazy.”

“Maybe not crazy, but VERY persistent,” Rambley tsked. He then sighed, putting his hands on his hips. “Just be careful, Buddy. I don’t want anything happening to you.”

“Same. I’ll be back!”

With that, Ed started again towards the castle. While Rambley sent a worried look after him, he didn’t call him back and resisted the urge to follow on foot.

It took a few minutes of dragging himself through the overgrowth around the side and back of the castle before Ed found the door. Thankfully it was surrounded in a section of paved ground which, while partially swallowed, gave the door enough room to keep it from getting covered.

There was a still functioning Critter Cuff sensor beside the door though and he scanned his cuff. The door unlocked and Ed opened it, revealing a musty smelling staircase.

It smelled like the warehouse that the Mineshaft Drop was in...

But the lights automatically clicked on and illuminated the staircase so brightly that it was almost blinding. No sound of scuffling or squeaks either. Yes, there had definitely been bats in here but they weren't there now.

Which meant they were either back at the closed in coaster or...

Ed took one last deep breath of cool night air before beginning down the steps into the buzzy yellow glow.

Meanwhile, far above in the castle, his friends were waiting with bated breath of their own. Well, save Daryl who had something to use that breath on.

"Does anyone else think there's something sketchy going on with that security guard guy?" Daryl asked.

"What? You mean because of the Rambley cosplaying? He's just shy," Laura brushed off.

“No, I mean the fact that nobody knows his name.”

“I got it wrong, that’s all.”

“No, you didn’t. Ed called him Rodney before, and I don’t think that’s the only one. And-!” Daryl pointed at the camera. “The camera’s on but nobody’s home? Where is he?”

“I don’t know! I’m not his keeper or whatever,” Laura tried again to dissuade. She looked over to the corner and then stared. “...Wait a second...”

“Lay off about the security guard guy, alright? I know you think he’s suspicious, but he’s not. Just let it go,” Leo defended.

Daryl looked at him in surprise. “What? Where’d that come from?”

“I met him. He’s cool.”

“What, today?”

“Today.”

“You met him?” Katie perked excitedly. “What’s he like?”

“He’s uh... Short.”

“Hold on. Why is there a camera on when there’s supposed to be no power?” Laura asked.

“Let’s ask the security guard that is and isn’t here and could be named one of six names,” Daryl laid out. Then he grew more serious. “And right, you get it. Between that and the power being on outside of the room, I don’t think this was a failure. Someone shut down the ride.”

“But why?”

“Because someone’s screwing with us, and who else has the ability to do it?”

“Okay, Daryl. You want the truth? Alright, I’ll tell you the truth, but you’re not going to believe me,” Leo said.

Laura looked at him in shock. “Wait-.”

“That Randy guy was in the back room when we came in,” Leo talked over her. “I saw him when I put up the beanbag. He was completely butt naked.”

Daryl’s eyes popped and Laura’s mouth dropped.

“That’s why I ran out,” Leo said simply.

“I thought you said he was wearing a bath towel?!”
Laura hastily shouted in.

“Sure, but he was naked under that,” he played along. Giving her an impish grin.

“Okay, you have to be lying,” Daryl started, only to get cut off.

“Wait, so- wait, he was there? The whole time? Oh my gosh...” Katie sputtered. She turned towards him. “Oh my gosh, Daryl. That’s- That’s why! That’s why he was acting so weird.” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “I should’ve called first. I had no idea- he didn’t say anything!”

“He’s... From what Ed says, his place doesn’t have hot water, so he just came over to take a shower,” Laura added. Technically not a lie!

Katie gasped a little and looked at Daryl again. “The two mugs!”

“Three mugs.”

“Still! I owe Ed a HUGE apology.”

“Don’t worry about it, he’s not mad,” Laura waved off. “But yeah, apologize.”

“And then apologize to us, because this sucks,” Leo tacked on. “Why would you want to come back here

at night? The place is totally abandoned. You could've showed up any time!"

"Hey, it wasn't my idea," Daryl tsked.

"It was mine," Katie admitted apologetically. "I thought it would feel more... spooky! It would fit the mood."

"But it's still-."

A bzzzt from a speaker caught their attention and they all looked up at the dark ceiling. Laura shined her light around, but she couldn't see the direct source.

A familiar voice spoke up. Daryl and Katie recognized it as the voice from earlier while the accent allowed Laura and Leo to recognize it as a member of the Battums Family.

But there was something strange about the recording, and it was immediately apparent.

“For fortnights and many moons, ze Battums Family, my family, have been bringing togetzer families of all kinds. Showing zat despite differences, ve can all live together in harmony. Zat things zat bump in ze night may not be evil but misunderstood. Zat bloodzuckers ‘ave feelings too.”

Everyone was confused but thought maybe it was some sort of show or part of the attraction, somehow. Thoroughly uncertain about what was going on, save Leo who was a little creeped out.

And save Laura who heard that voice and alarm bells started ringing instantly. She had met enough living mascots to know that this was entirely off script. That wasn't just a recording and that wasn't Rambley.

And that was clear the moment afterwards, when the voice dropped from its matter-of-fact explanation into a dismal low.

“But... my family is dying. Zey are starving. Hiding in ze darkness, regurgitating zeir few meals between

them. Vaiting for someone to wander inside... Ve vere abandoned here. By humans- like you. Abandoned us! And I- I wake to find my family growing thin in numbers and constitution. Feeding off rats, like animals.”

Suddenly his voice took a concerningly calm tone.

“But you can be part of ze solution now. And so many of you! More than enough. So much more zan before,” he muttered. “Ze average rodent carries mere ounces of blood... But ze human? An average of ten pints. More if lucky. Less vill still be plenty. And you...”

An ominous pause.

“You can live vitout a pint or two.”

Punctuated by a sharp squeak and clatter as a security shutter dropped down to block off the tracks leading back the way they came. Laura whipped her head over and shined the flashlight at it, seeing it

with her own eyes and realizing at that moment that they were in much bigger trouble than a stuck ride.

Daryl had been right; someone had been watching them the whole time. But it wasn't Rambley.

And it wasn't the other Rambley.

And they weren't getting out of here without a fight.

...

And...

She could hear distant chirping.